University of Alberta

Meaningful Matters: An Autoethnography of Hope for Academically Gifted High School Achievers

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
Counselling Psychology

Department of Educational Psychology

Edmonton, Alberta
Spring 2008

Library and Archives Canada

Published Heritage Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
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Direction du Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-45446-6
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-45446-6

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Abstract

Written as an autoethnography, this study explores the experience of six academically achieving gifted high school students alongside my experiences as a school counsellor working with gifted academic achievers in the Province of New Brunswick. Recent research in the area of gifted students suggests that high achieving students are at least as well adjusted as any other student in life; however, research also suggests that gifted students have a distinct set of qualities that may complicate their ability to set goals and to remain resilient against adversities. Research in the area of hope suggests that students with higher levels of hope indicate more satisfactory levels of academic achievement and greater competence in interpersonal relations than compared to students with lower levels of hope. Although hope has been studied in educational settings, researchers have not examined hope and how hope may be maintained with achieving gifted students who face the inevitable challenges that competition and high achievement in school impose on a regular basis.

Interactive interviews, systematic self-introspection, and retrospective observations were used to collect data detailing accounts concerning how academically achieving gifted individuals described their educational encounters and their experiences of hope on the educational landscape. Reflections from the participants are laid alongside my own accounts of hope and giftedness in high school education. Descriptions are presented as interwoven narratives and include my current thoughts as a researcher, my past experiences and observations as a school counsellor, and my understandings of the participants' stories.

Several key ideas emerged from the collection of data. Hope for these six gifted academically achieving students was described as a dynamic and energetic sense of confidence about their own futures. Early high school years (grades nine and ten) often served as a meaningless period in their educational careers that stifled their hopes. Enriched classes and independent studies in later years (grades eleven and twelve) offered students hope in their learning, because the independent learning style often focused on application and exploration of knowledge which made the learning process more meaningful. Further, these academically achieving students often felt as though their hope was challenged as they struggled to belong and fit-in with their peers, evaluated their performance against their peers on a regular basis, and attempted to manage the pressures from teachers, parents, and themselves. These struggles often led the students to believe that their marks defined them, restricted what was possible, caused the students to dissociate from the learning process, and overshadowed meaning and hope within the classrooms. Possible implications for teachers, parents, school counsellors, and academically achieving gifted students are offered and implications for further research are suggested.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Michael Holleran for his limitless support and devotion, to Jane and Merrill Edwards for their patience and guidance, to Paul Thompson for his commitment and professional role modeling, to Stephanie Thompson for her reassurance and strength, to my students for their encouragement and courage, and to my best friend Phillip for his unconditional friendship, personal insights, and hopeful spirit.

Acknowledgements

This research project certainly represents a dynamic group effort. For this reason, I wish to sincerely thank my participants: John, Jay, Victoria, Marie, David, and Peter. Their inspirational ideas and honest stories have forever changed my professional thinking. I would like to offer special recognition and thanks to my supervisor Dr. Denise Larsen. Her unwavering guidance, thoughtful reflection, and hopeful spirit encouraged this research to become a meaningful personal journey. I would also like to thank members of my supervisory committee, Dr. Mary Ann Bibby and Dr. Richard Sobsey. Their thought provoking comments challenged me and further stimulated the research process.

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EXPLORING HOPE

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

At a private school in Calgary, Alberta, Jessica walked into my office, sat down, and started to cry. "I just got a horrible mark on my Math 30 test, and I can't handle the pressures to do well anymore," she commented and awaited my reply. I realized that I had made a solid decision to research hope and gifted academic achievers throughout my Ph.D. program. I also realized that I had made the right decision to return to the school system to work with gifted academic achieving students.

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When I reflect on my own years in high school, I nearly always settled for second place or removed myself from the competition when success was imminent. I feared being able to do something well and often created a more difficult route throughout school. For me as a student, teacher, and school counsellor success was much more difficult and gruelling to maintain than it was to achieve in the first place.

When I was a high school student, I was satisfied when my teachers informed my mother that I was a "bright student who is capable of much more." From their perspective, it meant they believed I had the potential to achieve great academic success, but that I simply didn't desire to do so. Little did they know about what I was thinking or what I was really feeling inside.

.....

"Brrrrrrrrrriiiiiiiiinnnnggggg," the first period bell had gone. I was still at my second floor high school locker looking at my 98% math test from the previous unit. I was at the top of my class and scared to death to write the second unit math test.

"Could I pull it off again?" I questioned as the two-sided conversation started in my mind.

"Ahh, it was a fluke," my hopeless side taunted, "I'll choke this time for sure."

"I will be just fine," my hopeful side rallied into the battle. "I want to do well. I know this stuff. I could do it this morning, and I'll do it on the test."

"Yeah, everyone knows this stuff. Everyone that is, but me! I don't think I am up for the challenge, this time or in the future," the hopeless side mockingly shattered my confidence.

You see after the first unit test, our math teacher had called every student individually up to his desk to inquire as to our normal math test grades. "Kathryn, is this the grade you typically earn in math class?" he asked. I don't remember my response to his inquisition, but simply knew he expected me to continue doing well.

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Today, after having taught high school, I am certain of his intentions. He simply wanted to meet with every student to establish a connection. He did so, in the hopes of motivating his students to continue doing well, or as he would always say, "to pull up their socks." Caring for his students was part of his teaching style, but in many ways it served to create high expectations that were exceedingly difficult to maintain over his daily year-long math class.

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When I finally knocked on his door, I was slightly late for my second math test. It was only two minutes after the bell and would classify in his "forgivingly-tardy-noon-hour-detention-for-five-minutes" category.

"I'll just quietly walk into the class and slip into my desk," said my hopeful side.

"Careful not to trip, or drop your book," jeered my overly anxious side.

Upon my tardy entrance into the room, he announced to the class "the current leader in our class has arrived prepared to calculatingly attack her second unit test." It bothered me immensely to be challenged publicly when I was uncomfortable with my own success. Undoubtedly, it threw me from my prepared state.

"Why did he have to say that out loud? I hadn't told anyone my grade and it certainly wasn't his place to do so. I'll fail for sure now!" The negative internal dialogue began to battle again in my mind.

"No, stop it! I'll be just fine. I know this stuff."

I finally got to my desk, but I could not sit low enough in my chair to hide from or avoid the disdainful snickers of my classmates. I was shattered and so were my answers on my second unit math test.

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When I reflect on that very moment in my life, many thoughts come to my mind. Tiger Woods is often referred to as the greatest golfer in the history of the game, but I expect that he rarely plays a round of golf without being prepared mentally to handle the pressures of the game and the expectation of success gained from his previous high scores and wins. We prepare our high performance athletes for competition and the various pressures associated with doing well, but may not be adequately supporting our high performance students in the school system. We have specialized sports psychology

programs for athletes working and competing at high levels ten times a year, but we offer no specialized programs designed to mentally and emotionally prepare high performance gifted achieving students who face competition and pressure from themselves, their parents, their teachers, and their peers on a daily basis.

As a student in high school, I know my hope was challenged in such high pressure situations where my perfectionism began combating with my actions, thoughts, emotions, and ultimately began controlling the outcomes. My abilities to envision a positive future were often rattled in highly competitive circumstances. During such times, my overall confidence to face life's daily challenges was devastated. Much like a city that has been bombed relentlessly during war, my confident self embattled, I lacked the courage and fortitude to face other battles brewing on the horizon.

As a high school student, I backed away from being successful in the classroom. I hated the pressure to do well academically and rather chose to spend long hours at the barn working with my horse. I respected my fellow classmates who could exhaust countless hours studying and preparing for school. I thought they had it all figured out, that they knew how to be successful without losing a sense of themselves, and that they knew how to belong in such a competitive environment.

Interestingly, researchers have studied hope with other populations who are fighting for their lives in medical settings and defined hope within this population; however, we have not examined hope and how hope may be maintained with achieving gifted students who face the inevitable ups and downs that competition and high achievement impose on a regular basis in school.

. . . . .

Gifted Students

Recent research in the area of gifted students suggests that "high ability students are typically at least as well adjusted as any other youngster" in life (Robinson, 2002, p. xiv). Nevertheless, research also suggests that gifted students have a distinct set of qualities that may challenge their ability to set goals and to remain resilient against adversities. Such characteristics may in fact become "sources of risk" to their social and emotional development and may challenge their ability to remain hopeful about themselves, their futures, and their abilities. Gifted students have many talents that are often considered gifts rather than impediments. Yet, Silverman reminds us that they possess "an unusual set of challenges" (Silverman, 1993, p. 151) that are frequently dismissed because of their intellectual capabilities.

Many teachers, counsellors, and psychologists believe that gifted adolescents will survive and function on their own in the world because of their talents. Perhaps, they feel as though they are capable of creating and nurturing their own hope, or perhaps they may see no justifiable reason why gifted students shouldn't be hopeful. Conceptions, such as these, are simply myths (Robinson, 2002; Myers & Pace, 1986) as many gifted academically achieving individuals may faces a number of challenges. In order to be helpful, professionals from a variety of fields need to understand the experiences of academically achieving gifted adolescents and to hear their stories of what influenced their hope throughout their adolescent years.

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My grades in high school varied depending on the extent of my teachers' expectations, my ability to balance the pressure, and of course, the degree of my mother's nagging. My sister received high grades and scholarships to universities. I was satisfied

to get by without the exhausting demands and attention caused by success. In reflection, my grades were thankfully high enough to earn admittance into university. With no true intrinsic direction or motivation, but on the advice of my mother, I entered university and earned my Bachelor of Education. Fortunately, I started teaching immediately upon the completion of my B.Ed., and I was fascinated by my students and the teaching profession. For the first time in my life, learning created hope, meaning, and purpose in my life. I didn't want to stop studying, and I hoped to further understand the experiences and needs of my students. While I worked, I continued onwards with school and entered a Master's program in Counselling. Within three years of teaching/counselling experience in the public education system, I earned my Master's Degree in Education.

Being called Ms. Thompson (maiden name), required a period of adjustment and caused a steep personal and professional learning curve. At the beginning of my career, I had a long commute to work at a rural school. So at the time, my days started very early. One particular morning not long after I started work at this school, my home phone rang at an unusual hour as I was preparing to go to work. I answered the telephone and listened to the story my principal told. I received the news that morning that a former student of the school had given up all hope and taken his own life. He was a brilliant and academically gifted student who had gone off to university, but he could no longer handle the pressures of his young life. I didn't know the student, and I certainly couldn't understand how this happened. It was my assumption as a professional that he "had it all." We all considered him the student who was going to be successful beyond our imagination.

It was at that very moment in my life that I started to genuinely explore my own beliefs about academically gifted students. What pressures are these students potentially

under? What contributes to their heavy load, if they carry such a load at all? What is their experience of hope in their high school years? It seemed as though high ability did not appear to equate to hope for the future for this particular student.

As a gifted individual who had chosen a less competitive route, I had made the assumption that those who were gifted and achieving had it all. With this student's death, I began to question my supposition. I began to reflect on the gifts and challenges of giftedness. I began to revisit my own decisions about my giftedness in school, and I began to think about gifted students who chose to excel and the possible risks they took in doing so.

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Benefits of Hope

Researchers and scholars consistently consider hope to be essential to life (Herth, 2005, Farren, Herth, Popovitch, 1995). Hope represents a critical component in the human experience, as it serves as a thought, feeling, behaviour, and interpretative tool for understanding our existence (Farren, Herth, & Popovich, 1995). Snyder's hope theory (1994) defines hope as, "the sum of the mental willpower (motivation to accomplish the task and obtain the goal) and waypower (ability to find routes to accomplish the goal regardless of the obstacles that are presented) that you have for your goals" (p.5). Although many frameworks for hope exist, Snyder's model receives the most attention in educational domains. While some dispute the comprehensiveness of this model that highlights a goal-focused approach, the benefits of hope in educational settings are perhaps most clearly articulated in his research.

Focusing for the moment on Snyder's model, the value of hope is evident. High-hope individuals find the "will and the way" to see around whatever impediments exist

along their paths, while people with low-hope remain behind their barriers and lack the will and ability to conceive of ways to get past such obstacles in life. Snyder's hope theory (1995) has been applied with adults, children, and teenagers from diverse backgrounds. The theory explores hope across a variety of circumstances (Snyder, 1995) involving dealing with serious illness (Herth, 1991), entering college, (Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990), and attending school (Snyder, Lopez, et al., 2003).

Students who have higher hopeful thinking possess higher levels of perceived self-esteem and fewer symptoms of depression (Snyder, Hoza, Pelham, Rapoff, Ware, Danovsky, et al., 1997). Such feelings of hopelessness are a reliable predictor of suicide ideation (Beck, et al, 1985) in in-patient populations. Beck, et al. (1985) suggest that "if a patient answers with nine or more hopeless responses, this is an indication of elevated suicide risk, especially if there is a concurrent depression (cf. BDI)" (Newman, et al., 2002, pg. 83). Snyder, et al. (1997) theorize that hope may serve as a powerful orientation that helps protect against suicidality.

Students with higher levels of hope also indicate more satisfactory levels of academic achievement and greater competence in interpersonal relations than compared to students with lower levels of hope (Chang, 1998). Indeed, hope appears to be advantageous in helping academically achieving gifted students achieve their full potential (Snyder & Shorey, 2002). With important issues of mental health and academic achievement at stake, it is critical to understand how academically achieving gifted students experience hope throughout their high school years of development.

Snyder, et al. (2003) believe that enhancing hope in students should be a priority for teachers and school psychologists. They suggest that universal and targeted "hope raising techniques" be utilized in the school systems with individual students and with

students working in a group setting. Snyder, et al. (2003) suggest three categories for raising the hope of students: (a) setting goals, (b) formulating pathways, and (c) developing agency (p. 128). In addition to using techniques to foster hope, Snyder, et al. (2003) state that hope may flow from one person to another person. They refer to this phenomenon as the "ripple effect" and cite that eliminating barriers, facilitating goals, and creating hope contagions may assist in this process. While Snyder does not build this formally into his theory of hope, he is talking about relationship and community. Most other hope theorists and researchers recognize the profound effect of relationship and community in fostering hope within the individual (e.g., Dufault & Martocchio, 1985) and articulate that hope is more multi-dimensional than Snyder's model suggests (e.g., Dufault & Martocchio, 1985, Farren, Herth, & Popovich, 1995, Nekolaichuk, 1998). From multidimensional perspectives on hope, hope is considered to include cognition, but it also reflects affect, behaviour, contextual, and affiliative aspects. While these models have received relatively little attention from educational researchers, they have the potential to inform educational research as well and will be discussed further later.

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After two years of a horrible commute to work in the morning, I transferred to a large urban school that was much closer to home and became one of three school counsellors. Almost immediately upon starting work at the high school, I became involved with the school's enrichment committee and the academically achieving gifted students. As students and as people, they intrigued and fascinated me. They were all so very different and yet, shared similar concerns about their past, present, and future. They were concerned about creating a positive future for themselves. They also often believed that school and high marks were the only route to achieve such a future. My desire to

understand and my concern grew for the gifted achieving students in my school. I noticed how they became obsessed with marks, competition, rankings, and being 'perfect'. There were moments when I comprehended their predicaments and even admired their attempts to maintain their perfectionism, to face the challenges of high expectations, and to find their own way in the world. Yet, there were other moments when I felt lost as a professional. I became fearful of their intense self-criticism and their beliefs that high marks were the only route to success and happiness. I worried about how strongly they held such beliefs in life and what those beliefs might be setting them up for down the road. Overall, I found that I did not know how to be of assistance to my students.

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Mathieu sat alone, with his head down in my office one day over the lunch hour. For forty-five minutes, he kept to himself and said nothing to anyone including me. Struggling to understand, I watched as hope seemed to literally drain from his face and abandon his body. The silence was paralyzing and frightening. Earning high marks, competing for first place, and balancing the pressures from home and potential universities were each taking their toll on my gifted student. That particular day, I questioned whether I would see my student in the future.

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Will was one of my top achieving and unquestionably gifted students. He walked into my guidance office and began describing how he felt ashamed and alone in the world. He discussed his feelings of confusion and lack of confidence. He explained how everyone in the school used him as a "meter stick" to measure their own success and how teachers deliberately set out to

"stomp-on" his academic achievements. How did he remain hopeful under these circumstances?

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Jillian met me in the hallway after her Calculus class. She was crying uncontrollably and told me that she couldn't take this anymore. "I only got 93 % on the test, which will bring my grade point average down to 96 %," she explained, "and Will got 97 %." I knew this student had given up much of her free time on the weekend to study for this test and to try to beat "the measuring stick." Believing that to be alright, she needed to ace the exam. I didn't know if she could handle this upset.

.....

Once while working at the high school, a mother called my office and inquired about her daughter's marks. They were virtually perfect, 100 % in three of the five subjects. Yet, I knew that her daughter, Diana, didn't have a social life and felt judged by everyone in the school. Diana hated her life and felt driven by the pressures of her parents and her teachers to succeed.

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Jesse told me about his 'wild' weekend of drinking and partying. He told me how nice it was to 'fit in' and not be asked about his mark on his Physics 121 test. "They didn't see me as the brain in the room. They saw me for me, and I loved it, even if I was drunk out of my mind. I am going to go partying with them next weekend."

.....

Polly thrived on conversations and arguments. She felt bored with all of her subjects. So, she argued with the wrong person at the wrong time, and ended up in the office where there was "no room for argument." Despite having very high marks and a bright future, Polly was asked to leave the school because of her behavioural problems.

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These particular gifted students changed me. My experiences with them compelled me to re-examine my own beliefs, fears, and life patterns. I attempted to support them in as many ways as I could, and in several ways, I learned to encourage myself. Instead of shying away from their potentials or avoiding success, I tried to encourage them to, "Go, Go, Go" after what they truly wanted in life in spite of the possible downfalls and challenges they might face.

Towards the end of my third year at the urban high school, I received word from the University of Alberta that I had been accepted into the Ph.D. - Counselling Psychology program. At that moment in my life, I finally listened to my own advice as a school counsellor and, for what felt like the first time, went after success instead of running in the other direction. My gifted students' stories and personalities have served as gifts and in a curious way, offered a sense of hope in my own giftedness. Over the years, witnessing their lives and experiences have given me a sense of confidence and have helped to further my own self-understanding.

Throughout my research, I want to unwrap their presents to me and learn from my experiences with them. My aspirations for this inquiry are to examine how I, as a high school counsellor, understood and experienced the hope of gifted achieving students, to learn about how gifted high school academically achieving students experienced hope,

and to share these understandings with others in ways that could improve practices with academically achieving gifted students.

Research Focus

Nel Noddings (1996) an Education Professor at Stanford University, articulates that affect has been neglected in educational settings for far too long. As a result of the systematic disregard for sensitivity and emotion, Noddings (1996) suggests that students and teachers alike are less engaged in their studies and less resilient during times of hardship. Noddings (1996) clearly articulates that humanistic stories and affect must be brought back into the educational settings on a regular basis.

For these and the reasons identified earlier, I have chosen to talk to gifted academically achieving adolescents about their own experiences of hope in their educational pasts. In doing so, I hope to offer an "insider" perspective that augments and enriches our current understanding of hope and its role in the educational experiences of the lives of gifted academically achieving students. I recognize that my own experiences as a high school student and experiences as a high school teacher and counsellor are in some important ways inseparable from what I know and understand about hope and gifted students. I further acknowledge that gifted academically achieving students are often considered to be in positions of privilege and have access to resources many do not possess. Hence in this study, I attempt to explore the understanding of participants and myself as they relate to the experience of hope and high school education.

Nodding's (1996) research suggests that to help academically achieving gifted students address challenges and to fully benefit from their abilities, we need to learn about their experiences of hope in their academic environments and we need to encourage emotion and affect to be discussed with students in the classroom. A study

completed by Larsen and Larsen (2004) of twenty three grade ten students identified hope as appearing to be "an important and, seemingly, pervasive aspect of self during adolescence development" (p. 255). Yet, hope research within this school aged population is limited (Larsen & Larsen, 2004). The current research will begin to address this gap within the literature.

Having spent five years working as a school counsellor and endeavoring to comprehend my gifted students' struggles through school, my research focus for this autoethnographic study centers around the following question: *Acknowledging my personal and professional experiences in my research project, how do I understand the experiences of gifted New Brunswiek students and their hope, as I engage with them and their stories from their high school years?*

This research question formed the focus of my study. Throughout the study, I gathered and created detailed accounts concerning how academically gifted individuals described their educational encounters and their experiences of hope on the educational landscape. These individuals' accounts hold important possibilities for informing educational practice. Hence, the study also includes suggestions about how counsellors, psychologists, and teachers may help gifted students to increase and maintain their hope in the face of many difficulties experiences as achieving gifted high school students. Such suggestions were derived from an understanding of how hope was recognized by students, experienced by me as a school counsellor working with gifted students, and informed through my growing understanding throughout this research project.

Qualitative Methodology

My research project was conducted as a qualitative inquiry with the hopes of gaining an in-depth understanding of the lives of gifted adolescents and how they

experienced hope. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state that qualitative researchers utilize a variety of methods and practices to obtain data that will "describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (p. 5). In this study, I examined the experience of hope in the lives of gifted New Brunswick students who graduated from a New Brunswick high school, as well as systematically and explicitly reflected on my own experiences. In conducting this research project, I conducted an autoethnography, which includes experiences from gifted students who achieved academically throughout high school and from my work as a school counsellor and researcher. This process involved interviewing participants in-depth to gain insights from their perspectives on their high school years and completing an examination of my own writing concerning my professional experiences.

Terminology

For clarity throughout the study, definitions of the terms giftedness and hope were needed to help focus the project. Throughout history, the definitions of giftedness have varied dramatically. As Delisle and Galbraith (2002) observe, "there is no one right, absolute, or generally accepted definition of giftedness," as many broad definitions of the term giftedness exist within the literature (p. 14). Traditionally, the term giftedness is quantitatively defined through IQ scores. More recently, the term giftedness has been associated with broader definitions that encompass a wide variety of exceptional talents across many abilities. In essence, giftedness is no longer simply associated with higher levels of intelligence (Renzulli, 2002).

Students from the Province of New Brunswick served as participants for this study; therefore, the definition of "gifted" accepted and employed by the Province was utilized throughout this research project. The Province of New Brunswick defines

giftedness according to Joseph Renzulli's (1987) model that is still widely accepted in current literature. Renzulli (1987) states that gifted behaviour involves the interaction of three basic clusters of human traits: (a) above average ability (top 15% of intellectual aptitude), (b) task commitment (energy and concentration to complete a task), and (c) creativity (production of novel and original ideas or products). Although the definition created by Renzulli (1987) is accepted in the Province of New Brunswick, it is simply used as a guideline for identifying gifted students. For instance, the first basic trait (above average ability -top 15% of the intellectual aptitude) is not always measured by traditional psycho-educational assessments, but rather it is measured and continuously evaluated by school performance (grades and overall averages (> 85 %). As such, this study worked with individuals who were labelled gifted academic achievers by their New Brunswick school. It should be noted that within the New Brunswick Anglophone sector of the public educational school system, gifted students accounted for 0.6% of the total population of students in the school system (Department of Education-Province of New Brunswick, 2002).

Similar to the term gifted, the concept of hope has many theoretical models and definitions; however, such models and theoretical understandings have been primarily derived from medical and nursing perspectives. Within the educational literature, hope has been predominantly defined and researched by C. R. Snyder. Snyder is a cognitive psychologist who defined hope as "the process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move towards those goals (agency), and the ways to achieve those goals (pathways)" (Snyder, 1995, p. 355). From his perspective, "hope is not an emotion but rather a dynamic cognitive motivational system" (Snyder et al, 2002, p. 820). He

contends that "emotions follow cognitions in the process of goal pursuits" (Snyder, 2002, p. 820).

As mentioned earlier, Snyder contributed a significant amount of knowledge regarding hope within the educational field. Nevertheless, I believe his definition of hope is far too narrow in scope and "one-dimensional" to capture the essence of such a powerful and influential construct. With these reasons in mind and because nearly all other models of hope include a multi-dimensional focus, I have selected an alternative definition of hope presented by Dufault and Martocchio (1985) as the foundation for the present research study. Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) model serves as the foundational definition for hundreds of hope research studies (Eliott, 2005) and includes a cognitive dimension, such that it need not be thought of excluding Snyder's important findings within education. I contend that the following definition of hope is more multidimensional in nature and more accurately describes hope.

> Hope is a multidimensional life force characterized by a confident yet uncertain expectation of achieving a future good which, to the hoping person, is realistically possible and personally significant. Hope has implications for action and for interpersonal relatedness. Hoping is not a single act but a complex of many thoughts, feelings, and actions that change with time. Hope is multidimensional and process-oriented; it is not unidimensional or trait-oriented (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985, p. 380).

Such a definition offers additional conversational and story space for these research purposes, and it is consistent with recent research on the discursive properties of hope (Eliott & Olver, 2002), which reveals hope to have multiple meanings. Furthermore, Larsen and Larsen (2004) reveal that adolescents in their research educational setting offered descriptions of self most closely related to Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) description of "generalized hope." These statements provide

support for adopting Dufault and Martocchio's definition of hope as appropriate to the study of high school aged youth in educational settings.

EXPLORING THE LITERATURE

CHAPTER 2

I feel like a distant outsider in my own mind.
I am controlled by a powerful spirit that drives for perfection.
The only ground I have, the true sense of myself,
Is the ground that has just slipped away.
-Anonymous

Introduction

I decided to begin my review with this piece of literature that significantly altered the direction of my professional and academic careers. This short, yet forceful poem has remained on my desk since it was placed into my hands a few years ago. It has served as my "hope object" that has compelled me to research this very topic. When I read the words, I am reminded of the students that I have worked with in the past, and I am compelled emotionally to keep exploring their experiences. These words bring meaning, purpose, and direction to my work. The words of this poem foster a sense of hope in my work, because I can remember the student who wrote it and can celebrate where he is today.

In seeking to understand my research area as fully as possible, I conducted the following search for literature utilizing various search engines – Psych Lit, Academic Search Premier, ERIC, Hope Lit (Hope Foundation of Alberta), and the University of Alberta's Library database. The review addresses four major bodies of literature in order to orient the reader to topics pertaining to this study. The first section explores hope literature and examines the historical constructs of hope, components of hope, value of hope, hope as a moderating variable in life, hope and the connection to meaning, effects of hopelessness, and low hope. The second section reviews literature on gifted students. Throughout this section, the review explores social and emotional aspects of giftedness

and potential characteristics of being gifted. The final sections examine literature pertaining to gifted students' perspectives on education and programs for gifted students in the Province of New Brunswick at the time when the participants were students (1999-2005).

In conducting a thorough literature search, it became evident that there is a lack of research pertaining to the subject of how academically achieving gifted students experience hope, what factors influence their hope throughout their adolescent years and more specifically their educational endeavours, and how hope is maintained throughout this period in their lives. Furthermore, no studies were discovered that approached this topic from an autoethnographic perspective.

What is Hope?

Theorists and academics disagree over the nature of hope in human development (McGee, 1984). Was Erikson correct in believing that hope was created with successful resolution of the first of eight conflicts in life: trust versus mistrust (Bee, Boyd, & Johnson, 2003) and that hope is the "most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive?" (Erikson, 1964, p.115) Was Schmale (1964) accurate indicating that hope may be genetic? Is Marcel (1962) precise in stating that hope arises in times of challenge? Or, was Vaillot (1970) correct when she stated that hope begins when our personal assets are fatigued? The answers to these questions are still debated in the literature pertaining to hope; however, the importance of hope is rarely questioned in contemporary hope literature (Eliott, 2005). Over the course of history, much has been learned about this powerful concept and personal virtue.

History of Hope in the Literature

In his academic lecture given to the American Association of Psychiatrists in 1959, Karl Menninger spoke of a "basic but elusive ingredient" (p. 481) called hope. He articulated that academic and resource materials discuss the concept of faith, but when reviewing ideas about hope the "shelves are bare" (p. 481). From Menninger's (1959) perspective, hope is "unconcerned with the ambiguity of past experience" and implies an adventurous process geared towards confidently searching for the future (p. 484). Menniger (1959) stated the theoretical proposition "that hope reflects the working of the life instinct in its constant battle against the various forces that add up to self-destruction" (p. 485-486). In his concluding remarks, he altered the course of hope research. Menninger, in a very simple and humble fashion, suggested that scientists must be "duty bound" (p. 491) to speak "about this ancient but rediscovered truth" and further explore "the validity of hope in human development" (p.491).

In his address, Menniger (1959) also spoke of Marcel's writings that examined the "metaphysics" of hope. Marcel's (1944) work was the first "scholarly contemporary work about hope" (Pruyser, 1963, p. 87). Marcel defined hope as a verb rather than a noun. This parsimonious shift, allowed for hope to have a psychological direction and be considered a "process", "psychic activity", and "lived occurrence in a concrete and knowable setting" (Pruyser, 1963, p. 87).

Marcel and Menninger appear to be some of the first academics to write specifically about the concept of hope. Marcel and Menniger's scholarly contributions, sincere interest, and theoretical formulations concerning the construct of hope paved the way for hope research in the following decades.

Hope Constructs

The following section of my literature review examines the construct of hope examining contemporary definitions of hope and highlighting key hope theories.

Definitions of Hope and Hope Theories

Hope theory and research has exploded over the past 20 years, with the field of nursing leading the way (Eliott, 2005). The most common perspectives on hope hold that hope is multidimensional and uniquely based on individual experience and context. Hope is most often understood as a multidimensional construct (Elliot, 2005) and some suggest that this is the reason for its often elusive quality. The following review will examine common hope theories and definitions.

Dufault and Martocchio

Dufault and Martocchio (1985), both nurses, devised a theoretical model of hope from their seminal work with elderly cancer patients. The model was then validated with several other populations. Within their model, hope is a

> multidimensional dynamic life force characterized by a confident yet uncertain expectation of achieving a future good which, to the hoping person, is realistically possible and personally significant (p. 380).

Not only is their hope theory multidimensional in nature, it is process-oriented rather than trait-oriented or outcome oriented. They suggest that all individuals, regardless of their personality traits or natural disposition, are capable of hoping. Their conceptualization of hope states that hope is comprised "of two spheres having six common dimensions" (p. 380). The two spheres, generalized hope and particularized hope, relate to one another but are unique. Generalized hope offers "an intangible umbrella that protects the hoping person by casting a positive glow on life" (p. 380). Generalized hope provides a person

with a "broad perspective for life" and allows a person to face challenges with "flexibility and openness" (p. 380). On the other hand, particularized hope focuses on a certain "valued outcome" or a "hope object" (p. 380), and it is based on the assumptions that "what exists in the present can be improved" and "that desired outcomes surrounding an event will occur" (p. 380) at some point.

Dufault and Martocchio (1985) indicate that there are six common dimensions of hope that describe the elements and structures of the experience of hope. The six dimensions of hope are "affective, cognitive, behavioural, affiliative, temporal, and contextual" (p. 381). The affective dimension centers upon "sensations and emotions that are part of the hoping process" (p. 382) with no one specific feeling that characterizes the entire hoping experience. "Processes by which individuals wish, imagine, wonder, perceive, think, remember, learn, generalize, interpret, and judge" (p. 382) pertain to the cognitive dimension. The affiliative dimension comprises "the hoping person's sense of relatedness or involvement beyond self" (p. 382). The experience of time (past, present, and future) constitutes the temporal dimension. The "life situations that surround, influence, and are a part of a persons' hope" (p. 382) formulate the contextual dimension of hope in this model.

Farren, Herth, and Popovitch

Some suggest that the multidimensional nature of hope (Elliot, 2005) is the reason that it is often considered an indefinable construct. In a review of the literature, Farren, Herth, and Popovitch (1995) define hope "as an elusive, mysterious, and "soft" concept" (p. 5). Godfrey (1987) suggests the elusiveness of the word stems from the fact that it functions in various ways in the English language including as a noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. Farren, Herth, and Popovitch (1995) document that the word hope most

commonly functions as a verb. They state that when hope is utilized as a verb in a sentence, the "object of hope is not clearly expressed, but hope rests in someone or something else" (p. 5). They also mention that when hope is utilized as a noun, it "suggests the possibility that the desired outcome will occur" in the future (p. 5).

Farren, Herth, and Popovitch (1995) conclude that the ambiguousness of the word and the concepts occurs because hope serves as a "way of feeling", "way of thinking", and "way of behaving or relating" (p. 5). As an emotion, hope is an "energizing force" that fuels a person forward despite the adversities (p.5). As a thought, hope details a "sense of fortitude" and an "assumed certainty" regarding the future (p. 5). Finally, behaviourally hope describes a "way of behaving" that demonstrates how an individual continues to seek alternatives and solutions to their current dilemmas (p. 5).

Additionally, the complexity of the concept of hope continues because the word hope may also be considered a personality "trait" or a personality "state" (Farren, Herth, & Popovitch, 1995; Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990). According to Farren, Herth, and Popovitch (1995), as a state, hope describes the sentiments an individual may have at a particular point in time. In this context, hope is not static, but it is dynamic and temporary. As a trait, hope is a consistent and enduring posture towards all facets of life.

In a review of hope scholarship and research on hope and hopelessness, Farren, Herth, and Popvitch (1995) state that hope and hopelessness have a dialectical relation and each construct has four central attributes. They include "an experiential component, a spiritual or transcendent component, a rational thought process, and a relational process" (p. 6) often referred to respectively as the "pain, soul, mind, and heart of hope" (p. 10). The experiential (pain) process of hope states that a person must have encountered a situation in life that challenged the individual in a certain manner.

According to Farren, Herth, and Popovitch (1995) the hoping person is able to accept "these human trials as integral parts of (them)selves" and allow the "creative and imaginative process to occur" making the boundaries of a situation appear wider.

Farren, Herth, and Popovitch (1995) additionally state that the spiritual or transcendent (soul) process of hope includes "faith in oneself and others [and] a conviction about something that has not yet been proven" (p. 7-8). In this context, hope has a spiritual attribute that allows people to overcome the adversities in their lives. The rational (mind) thought aspect of hope (Farren, Herth, and Popovitch, 1995) is the reality base or the cognitive element of hope. Farren, Herth, and Popovitch (1995) refer to GRACT as an acronym, which further clarifies the components. (G – Goals, R – Resources, A – Active Process, C – Control, T – Time). The final component according to Farren, Herth, and Popovitch (1995) is the relational (heart) component of hope. They state that hope is "something that occurs between persons" (p. 10). This attribute indicates that hope can be communicated and shared with another person.

Miller

Miller (2000) views hope as "one of a person's most valued, private, and powerful resources" (p. 523). In this definition, derived from her grounded theory study with critically ill patients, Miller (2000) clarifies her views on hope.

> Hope is a state of being, characterized by an anticipation of a continued good state, an improved state or a release from a perceived entrapment. The anticipation may or may not be founded on concrete, real world experience. Hope is an anticipation of a future that is good and is based upon mutuality (relationships with others), a sense of personal competence, coping ability, psychological well-being, purpose and meaning in life, as well as a sense of "the possible". (Miller, 1986, p. 52; as cited in Miller, 2000, p. 523-524)

Miller (2000) states that "to hope" is dramatically different than, "to hope that" a particular event occurs in life (p. 542). She contends that "to hope" represents a powerful state of being that is difficult to challenge where "to hope that" refers to a specific object or situation of hope they may not be obtained or realized (p. 542).

Snyder

Snyder (1995), a clinical psychologist, defines hope as the act of "thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation towards (agency) and the ways to achieve (pathways) those goals" (p. 355). In his theory of hope, Snyder (1994) cites that three core components are required (a) goals ("objects, experiences, or outcomes that we have imagined and desired in our minds" (p. 5), (b) willpower (the motivation to obtain a goal-to get it done), and (c) waypower (the ability to find routes-to make it happen). His theory of hope is based on the belief that hope is "cognitive energy and pathways for goals" (p. 355). In straightforward terms, to hope is to have the "will and the way" to accomplish a particular life task. A person of high hope possesses both willpower and waypower for their goals (Snyder, 1994, p. 11). Snyder's model is unidimensional in nature, as it only deals with hope on a cognitive level and states that "hope is not an emotion" (2002, p. 820), and consequently, cannot be an emotional experience.

Although cognitive in nature, Snyder (1995) believes that emotions are not immaterial. He states that a high-hope person approaches a task with a sense of energy and a "positive emotional state" (p. 355), and the high-hope individual focuses on the positive aspects of the dilemma and success rather than on failure and disbelief. Furthermore, he suggests that low-hope individuals cannot find either the will and/or the way to accomplish their desired outcome.

Nekolaichuk

Nekolaichuk (1998), a counselling psychologist, utilized Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) model and definition of hope to elaborate a theoretical model of the concept. Nekolaichuk's (Nekolaichuk, Jevne, & Maguire, 1999) theoretical model was derived from a sample of 550 people (healthy adults n=146), individuals with chronic illness and/or life threatening illness (n=159), nurses (n=206). Utilizing factor analysis, her model helps to bring a holistic meaning to the understanding of the experience of hope. Nekolaichuk's research identifies three distinct interconnected factors that characterize the structure of hope. The three factors or dimensions of hope are "(a) personal spirit (personal dimension-core theme of meaning), (b) risk (situational dimension-core theme of predictability and boldness), and (c) authentic caring (interpersonal dimension-core theme of credibility and comfort)" (p. 601-602).

Hinds

Hinds (1988) completed a study on three groups of adolescents, one group comprised of healthy adolescents, another consisted of adolescents with substance abuse history, and the final group encompassed adolescents with cancer. From her research, Hinds shares that hope from an adolescent perspective is "the degree to which an adolescent possesses a comforting or life sustaining, reality-based belief that a positive future exists for self and others" (p. 85). Because Hinds' (1988) theory presents information regarding how adolescents view and experience hope, the work holds the potential to offer a developmental perspective on hope that may also be germane to this study. It does not, however, address how academically achieving gifted adolescents view the experience of hope.

Attributes of Hope

Jevne and Miller (1999) state that "we hope because it is essential to the quality of our life," (p. 11) and that with hope "we may deepen as a human being." Jevne and Miller (1999) further articulate that "with hope, whatever the outcome, we can go on" (p. 11). In the broader context, having hope reminds us that more may be possible then originally imagined and having hope is about discovering possibility, not simply probability (Hafen, et al. (1996).

Hope has many characteristics that appear in a variety of situations and for a number of reasons. Jevne (1991), a keen observer of hope and author of several texts, describes how hope is an "intangible" that is a powerful force in our lives. Jevne (1991) states that hope has the following characteristics and attributes:

> Hope is a crucial antidote to fear, hope is commonly found in a life situations that have an element of captivity or uncertainty, hope is always set in the context of time, hope is as likely to be experienced in the symbolic, unconscious realm as in the cognitive, rational realm, the experience of hope runs through all dimensions of life, and hope is basically a shared experience (p. 149-152).

Sources of Hope

Jevne (1991) suggests there are many things a person, a group of people, or a therapist can do in order to enhance levels of hope. She encourages people trying to enhance their hope to: "hear narratives, make something happen, share hope stories, practice hope rituals, encourage hope images, look for hope models, build hope bridges, create hope symbols, offer hope suggestions, share 'hopeful' humour, look for hope, and to sustain your own hope" (p. 164-171).

Snyder (1995) further shares methods for individuals to increase their sense of hope and the hope of another person. He refers to the process as "building or rebuilding

agency and pathways" (p. 358). His suggestions are cognitive in nature and focus on the intellectual aspects of hope. He urges low-hope individuals to strengthen their hope by: "learning self-talk about succeeding, thinking of difficulties encountered as reflecting wrong strategies, not talent, thinking of goals and setbacks as challenges, not failures, recalling past success, hearing stories of how other people succeeded, cultivating friends with whom you can talk about goals" (p. 358).

Miller (1989) utilized grounded theory techniques to discover sixty "hope-inspiring" strategies for maintaining hope in critically ill adults (ages 38-83). She states that nurses may use these strategies while working with the patients who are chronically ill. Samples of the strategies that Miller (1989) describes are (a) cognitive strategies – using positive talk to alter negative perceptions about the future; (b) determinism – creating a positive mental attitude and believing that a positive outcome is possible; or (c) philosophy of life – viewing life as having meaning that is created through struggles and challenges (p. 25-26). Miller (2000) notes that using humour, relaxation techniques, and distraction may additionally prove advantageous while attempting to sustain hope in chronically ill patients.

Connecting Hope to a Sense of Meaning

Hope and meaning in life have long been connected in the literature. Some of the most compelling writings on the topic are those of Victor Frankl, a doctor and a concentration camp survivor. Victor Frankl (1963) states that meaning is a fundamental component of human existence and human experience. He asserts that sustaining meaning in one's daily life ultimately will help to maintain a sense of well-being, peace, connectedness with others, and connectedness with something greater than oneself. If

left unfilled, the lack of meaning in one's life may cause negative physical and mental symptomatology.

In order to create meaning in one's life, Breitbart and Heller (2003) suggest that hope is required, as hope gives meaning and value to life. They also agree with Frankl's assumptions, as they additionally believe that a loss of meaning in life leads to a sense of despair and hopelessness. Their experiential work with terminally ill patients with cancer outlines a meaning-centred psychotherapy approach that works to sustain critically important hopes when hope for a cure is lost.

The Value of Hope

The value of hope is perceptible in everyday life, as it brings meaning and purpose to living (Miller, 1989). Additionally from Snyder's (1995) perspective, high-hope individuals can find the "will and the way" to see around whatever adversities they may face in life. On the other hand, people with low-hope will remain captive by barriers, because they lack the will and the ability to conceive of ways to get around such obstacles in life. Such dilemmas may range from dealing with serious illness (Herth, 1991), to entering college, (Averill, Catlin, & Chon, 1990), to attending school (Snyder, Lopez, et al., 2003).

Furthermore, research using Snyder's goal-focus on hope indicates that students who have higher hopeful thinking maintain higher levels of perceived self-esteem and less symptoms of depression (Snyder, Hoza, Pelham, Rapoff, Ware, Danovsky, et al., 1997). Hopeful thinkers are also more likely to conceptualize outcomes in a more positive light than less hopeful thinker (Snyder, Hoza, et al. (1997). Further, students with greater levels of hope exhibit greater levels of academic achievement and greater competence in interpersonal relations than compared to other teenagers with lower levels

of hope (Chang, 1998). Hope additionally correlates positively with higher achievement test scores (Snyder, Hoza, et al., 1997) and relates to higher overall grade point averages in junior high school (Lopez, Bouwkamp, Edwards, & Teramoto Pediotti, 2000) and high school (Snyder, Harris, et al., 1991). High hope students are less likely to experience anxiety and self-doubt in academic situations (Chang, 1998); rather, they are more likely to experience feelings of confidence and inspiration (Snyder, Harris, et al., 1991). Reviewing the literature, Cheaven, Michael, and Snyder (2005) state that "higher hope virtually always is related to more beneficial life outcomes" (p. 127). Furthermore, Snyder, et al. (1997) report that high hope individuals have favourable views of interpersonal relationships and have the capacity to form solid attachments to other people in their lives.

The value of hope is supported in non-educational settings as well, particularly in situations of personal struggle. Hope is known as a valuable resource to human beings in a variety of horrific situations. For instance, Henderson and Bostock (1975) suggest that hope helps to nourish and support individuals through natural disasters. Frankl (1962) deems that hope permitted survival in concentration camp experiences during the Second World War, and Nardini (1952) shares that hope was instrumental in surviving prisoner of war experiences. Empirical findings and clinical research support that hope may promote healing (Gottschalk, 1985), facilitate the coping process (Herth, 1989), and enhance the quality of life (Nekolaichuk, Jevne, & Maguire, 1999).

Hope as a Moderating Variable

The value of hope as a resource is justified by a variety of researchers (Miller, 2000; Seligman, 1995; Menninger, 1959), but hope may also be considered a moderating variable that serves as an aid and a prerequisite for effective coping strategies (Jaloweic

& Powers, 1981; Stoner & Keampfer, 1985, Weisman, 1979). Herth (1990) studying the coping level of one hundred and twenty persons with cancer, undergoing chemotherapy, found that those with higher hope had a greater capacity to hope and to cope with their situations. Further, Brandt (1987) found that thirty-seven women living with breast cancer and undergoing chemotherapy experienced a high level of hope, social support, and religious beliefs as being helpful in the coping process.

While hope is considered a moderating variable for individuals coping with chronic illness, it has also been considered an aid in the coping processes of family members and peers to those who are critically ill. For instance, Herth (1990) found that a positive relationship exists between hope and grief resolution in seventy-five individuals who had lost a spouse within a year to a year and a half. Further, Brockopp, Hayko, Davenport, and Winscott (1989) identify hope as a need of family members whose loved ones were battling cancer. Campbell (1988) further found hope to be a need for family members of persons with brain injuries.

Specifically related to youth, Yarcheski, Scoloveno, and Mahon (1994) found that hopefulness may be established through social support and perceived social support. In 2001, Yarcheski, Mahon, and Yarcheski completed a related study revealing that self-esteem and hopefulness served as moderating variables to general well being.

Theoretical Understandings of Hopelessness

For many individuals, hopelessness seems more tangible than hope. In fact, hopelessness was studied prior to hope because it was considered a serious human problem in need of attention (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In attempting to understand hope, it is important to understand some literature on hopelessness and how hopelessness and hope are thought to be related to one another.

Lynch (1965), one of the early seminal authors on hope, argues that hope and hopelessness are related, although they are dramatically opposite experiences. Lynch (1965) states that there were five areas of hopelessness that should be acknowledged: death, personal imperfections, imperfect emotional control, inability to trust people, and personal areas of incompetence. Reminiscent of Lynch (1965), Farren, Herth, and Popvitch (1995) state that similarly to hope, hopelessness "constitutes as essential experience of the human condition" (p. 25). Yet, more in keeping with Dufault and Martochhio (1985), Farren, Herth, and Popvitch (1995) believe that hope and hopelessness can co-exist at the same time. Stotland (1969), who was one of the first to postulate a cognitive perspective on hope, believes that as hopes increase, hopelessness decreases. Scotland (1969) also believes that with hope a person may plan for the future and without hope a person is focused on the moment. Indeed, it was Stotland's "future oriented" notions about hope that influenced Snyder's goal focused cognitive model of hope.

Attributes of Hopelessness

Hopelessness may serve as a "feeling of despair and discouragement" (Farren, Herth, & Popovitch, 1995, p. 25) or as a "deenergizing force" (Farren, Herth, & Popovitch, 1995, p. 25; Korner, 1970). People who are feeling hopeless may feel as though they cannot act, cannot surpass their current state of being, and cannot effect positive change for a better future (Engel, 1968; As cited in Farren, Herth, & Popovitch, 1995). Hopelessness may also serve as a "thought process that expects nothing" (Farren, Herth, & Popovitch, 1995, p. 25). In this cognitive frame, people may experience impairments in their thinking and may have irrational thoughts. Committing to plans and creating various methods for solving problems may prove to be exceedingly difficult for

individuals who are in a hopeless frame of mind (Farren, Herth, & Popovitch, 1995). Hopeless individuals believe that no one can be of assistance and contend there are no solutions to their aliments (Lynch, 1965). Thus, such individuals "expect little from others or themselves" (Farren, Herth, & Popovitch, 1995, p. 24; Lynch, 1965). Consequently, hopelessness can serve as "a behavioural process in which the person attempts little or takes inappropriate action" (Farren, Herth, & Popovitch, 1995, p. 25).

Beck, Brown, Berchick, Stewart, and Steer (1990) assert that hopelessness may manifest itself as a temporary state, which may be a personal reaction and present only for a short period of time, or as a personality trait that exists within the character of the individual. Furthermore, hopelessness may result from a variety of factors or sources of hopelessness (Farren, Herth, & Popovitch, 1995, p.36). Farren, Herth and Popovitch (1995) summarize these factors in three different categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and environmental/sociological factors. Essentially, hopelessness may be stimulated by a lack of personal resources (internal and external) or an inability to process and respond to life's challenges (Farren, et al., 1995).

Effects of Hopelessness

The effects of hopelessness have been well documented in the psychological literature (Beck, et al., 1990; Farren, et al, 1995; Campbell, 1987; Lynch, 1965, Kwon, 2000, Snyder, et al., 2003). Beck, et al. (1985) state that hopelessness is one of the strongest indicators of suicidal ideation in adolescent in-patient populations. Spirito, et al. (1989) indicate that hopelessness has been found to be a significant contributor to suicidal behaviour during adolescence. Further, Hewitt, et al. (1997) state that hopelessness in adolescent psychiatric patients contributes in unique and specific ways to suicidal ideation and behaviours.

In research specifically exploring how to foster motivation, hope, and resilience in children with learning disorders, Brooks (2001) states that "this sense of hopelessness served as a major obstacle to future success" (p. 9). He further states that once children contend things will not improve, they are more likely to "engaged in self-defeating ways of coping such as quitting or avoiding tasks, blaming others for the difficulties, or becoming class clowns or bullies" (p. 9). Such a downward spiralling cycle may ignite intense feelings of defeat and despair in students from which return to emotional stability may be a difficult journey.

Effects of Low Hope

Low hope differs from hopelessness in its intensity. Low hope implies that there is a slight amount of hope, where hopeless suggests that no hope exists. Kwon (2000) reports that individuals with lower levels of hope often experience more depressive symptoms. Snyder, et al. (2003) indicates that students with low hope "experience high anxiety, especially in competitive, test taking situations" (p. 125). Snyder (1999) also states that students with low hope frequently do not respond to negative criticisms constructively, but rather they are apt to question themselves and doubt their own abilities. Such self-questioning techniques have been found to negatively affect attentional processes and decoding and encoding information (Snyder, 1999). Low-hope individuals may often experience interpersonal troubles (aggression towards others and frustration) (Snyder, 1994) and may be susceptible to the interpersonal problems of other people (Hinton-Nelson, Roberts, & Snyder, 1996).

Difficulties in Discussing Hope

I'd rather have hope than be able to define it (Godfrey, 1987, p. 248).

Most researchers and clinicians would not argue that hope makes a positive difference in how individuals live their lives (Simpson, 2004) and serves as a way of being (Miller, 2000). Yet, recently researchers suggest that a "variety of versions" of hope exist for individuals (Eliott & Olver, 2002, p. 189), and in order to truly comprehend the experience of hope, one must understand the function and meaning of hope for that particular individual. Given that the current study attempts to discuss hope with individuals, it is important to understand how hope may and may not have been experienced in relation to giftedness and achievement in high school; therefore, a nuanced and careful approach to understanding hope is important.

In addition to the problems that may arise due to the many dimensions of hope, Simpson (2004) reminds that "to hope exposes one or makes one vulnerable to the sense of loss or hurt that may be experienced if this hope does not come to pass; and, the more important the hope is to the individual, the greater that sense of loss or hurt may be" (p. 443). Exposing and sharing hopes places individuals in a susceptible position that many people may not want to experience. "Explicitly attending to one's hopes may be risky, but naming one's hopes to others is also risky" (p. 443). It is a vulnerable position, because in speaking of deeply held hopes, one can never be truly convinced that others will respond appropriately and sensitively to the disclosure. Simpson (2004) states "if our hopes are shared with others, there are the attendant risks that these others will scorn, laugh at, or reject what is hoped for or will simply ignore what is said" (p. 443).

Who are the Academically Gifted?

Throughout the following section, literature pertaining to the field of the social and emotional needs of gifted adolescents and the common psychological issues that appear in educational contexts are discussed; however, in order to create a research context, this section begins with an overview of the field of gifted education and the history of counselling gifted students. For the sake of variety, the terms "gifted", "academically gifted", and "high achievers" will be used interchangeably but will refer to those students who are of advanced academic abilities and achieving.

It should be noted that gifted students are a "highly diverse group of individuals" (Robinson, 2002, p. xiii) and as such, this information is offered as information to provide context for my study. Interestingly, and likely typical of our pathology-focused culture, most literature on the characteristics of gifted adolescents focuses on their difficulties and challenges. Hence, this forms the bulk of my literature review in this area.

Overview of the Field of Gifted Education

A variety of definitions and models have been put forth throughout history for the term giftedness (Renzulli, 2002). Such definitions have described the parameters for the term and have determined which students meet the restrictive requirements to be considered gifted. Interestingly throughout history, the restrictive definitions for giftedness have ranged from being very conservative to being very liberal in scope (Renzulli, 2002).

One of the first studies concerning giftedness that represents a conservative and constrictive view of giftedness was completed by Lewis Terman. His longitudinal study began in 1921 and was titled *Genetic Studies of Genius*. It yields an unparalleled amount

of information regarding gifted children, adolescents, and adults. Terman and his associates collected information on the social, physical, emotional, and career development of 1528 gifted children over the course of their lives. Participants were selected for his study based solely on intellectual ability, "the top 1% level in general intellectual ability, as measured on the Standford-Binet Intelligence Scale or comparable instrument" (Terman, 1926, p. 43). Terman's research team examined gifted individuals' intellectual accomplishments and propensities as well as their overall life satisfaction (Terman, 1925; Burks, Jensen & Terman, 1930; Terman & Oden, 1947; Teman & Oden, 1959). This longitudinal study concludes that gifted individuals were well adjusted and required little assistance to function and achieve their full potential (Terman, 1925).

Terman's participant selection practice represents a restrictive and conservative view of giftedness that provides a "clear cutoff level and tidy identification practices" (Renzulli, 2002, p. 68). Numerous scholars and practitioners "argue that [Terman's definition] overlooks numerous students whose potential for superior performance simply does not show up on intelligence tests" (Renzulli, 2002, p. 68), for example, individuals who fall into a minority group and individuals with learning disabilities.

Throughout the following years, psychologists and educators followed Terman's lead and continued to associate giftedness with high IQ scores. Other researchers, such as Thurstone (1947) and Guilford (1967), suggest that giftedness and intelligence cannot be expressed as such a univariate construct. Thurstone (1947), a psychologist, suggests that verbal comprehension, memory, reasoning, ability to visualize spatial relationships, numerical ability, word fluency, and perceptual speed were the abilities that ultimately function throughout intellectual tasks. Guilford (1967), a psychologist, presents a multi-dimensional model of intelligence referred to as the Structure of the Intellect, which

outlines many types of intellectual abilities. His "Structure of the Intellect" was determined through a detailed analyses of intelligence in terms of specific skills, which lead Guilford (1967) to divide intellectual performance into three dimensions each with several abilities: (a) operations (how individuals process information), (b) content (what a learner thinks about), and (c) products (how a learner organizes the information). Guilford's work encouraged researchers to view intelligence as a more diverse concept.

Multifaceted approaches to giftedness were explored throughout the 1980's and the 1990's that supported a more liberal view of giftedness and a broader view of intelligence (Renzulli, 2002). In 1978, Joseph Renzulli, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Connecticut, described gifted behaviours, rather than gifted individuals. As discussed in the first chapter of this document, Renzulli (1978) created a three ring concept of giftedness that has been influential with school districts (Renzulli, 2002) and has served to view giftedness as being multifaceted rather than univariate. Renzulli (2002) suggested that,

> gifted behaviour consists of behaviours that reflect an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits – above average ability, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity (p. 69).

Research that supports a more multidimensional view of giftedness was presented by Howard Gardner (1983) in his ground breaking book entitled *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences.* Gardner (1983) proposed a view of intelligence that suggests there are at least seven separate kinds of intelligences: linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Gardner (1999) suggested that an eighth intelligence, naturalistic intelligence, and a ninth intelligence, spiritual intelligence, be added to the list. His work with multiple

intelligences has been very influential in educational settings across the country (Woolfolk, Winnie, & Perry, 2000).

In support of the multifaceted work of Gardner, Daniel Goleman, a former professor at Harvard University, published a book in 1994 entitled *Emotional Intelligence: Why Can It Matter More Than IQ*. Goleman's (1994) views on intelligence argue that the traditional views of human intelligence are far too limiting in scope and omit specific emotional abilities that ultimately matter more in our daily lives. Collected from his brain and behavioural research, Goleman (1994) suggests that factors, such as self-awareness, self-discipline, and empathy constitute a person's emotional intelligence and bring remarkable benefits to our work, school, relationships, and health. Such a view of emotional intelligence has helped to shape our understanding of a more liberal multidimensional view of intelligence.

Additionally, Robert Sternberg's (1984, 1997) work presents a more multifaceted and less restrictive approach to intelligence and giftedness. In 1984, Sternberg, a psychologist and noted academic from Tufts University, first presented his triarchic theory of intelligence with three dimensions of intelligence: (a) analytical (the ability to dissect a problem and understand its parts), (b) creative (the ability to adapt to novel situations), and (c) practical (the ability to apply both creative and analytical intelligences to everyday cultural settings.) In 1997, Sternberg clarified his triarchic theory of intelligence and suggested that his three dimensions of intelligence are rather components of successful intelligence. He feels strongly that each person "presents a different profile of the three types of intelligences but typically displays stronger talents in one area than another" (Sternberg, 2006, p. 22). Sternberg (2006) also suggests that the "best workers, draw on all three" (p.22) intelligences (analytical, creative, and practical).

Definitions that represent a more liberal or multidimensional view of giftedness have grown in popularity throughout history (Renzulli, 2002). Such definitions have shaped school districts' perspectives of giftedness and have significantly influenced how educators work with students with diverse talents. Such a diverse view of term giftedness asks researchers and educators to examine not only how we educated gifted students, but also encourages them to consider how to work with gifted individuals on a social and emotional level.

Historical Perspectives of Counselling Gifted Students and Understanding their Social and Emotional Needs

Emerging out of three specific educational movements (testing procedures, child development studies, and vocational and educational guidance), counselling programs and research involving the social and emotional needs of gifted students began in the early 1920's (Myers & Pace, 1986). While Terman was working with specific students on the west coast of the United States and collecting information on the characteristics of gifted students and determining that gifted students are well adjusted, Leta Hollingworth was engaging with gifted individual students from the New York City public schools (Myers & Pace, 1986). Trained as a clinical psychologist, Hollingworth (1926, 1942) employed longitudinal case studies and found that most gifted students were well adjusted; however, she reported that once a students IQ score rose above the 150 mark, social and emotional problems increased.

Hollingworth (1942) identified several special concerns related to gifted students. First, she suggested that gifted students' academic needs were not satisfied within the regular school system, and that they spent a significant amount of time on activities they considered boring and repetitive. Second, Hollingworth suggested that gifted students

struggled to establish successful peer relationships, which often lead to social isolation. Third, she indicated that a difference between intellectual and emotional development existed with students who were gifted, and that such a discrepancy resulted in social challenges for certain individuals. Finally, Hollingworth found that gifted students had difficulties in determining a career path, because they struggled to narrow their interests and often experienced stress as a result of the expectations of others (Hollingworth, 1942). Such historical findings demonstrated that gifted students have specific needs that should be addressed through counselling and guidance programs (Myers & Pace, 1986).

Influenced by Hollingworth, other researchers continued to explore the personality and behavioural characteristics of gifted students and also their specific social and emotional needs (Witty & Jenkins, 1934; Witty, 1940; Strang, 1951; Strang 1960). Their collective work elaborated on Hollingworth's findings and encouraged the use of counselling strategies to help gifted individuals to gain self-fulfillment and life satisfaction. Strang (1951) specifically suggested that counselling strategies focus on the development of self-understanding, positive self-concept, and social responsibility. Further, she encouraged counsellors to gain the involvement of the family and the school in the counselling process in order to genuinely help gifted students to find meaning in their lives.

Throughout the late 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's a significant amount of work in the area counselling gifted students was developed for educators and a number of centers started to emerge. In 1957, John Rothney founded the Wisconsin Guidance Laboratory for Superior Students at the University of Wisconsin, which later changed its name to the Guidance Institute for Talented Students (G.I.F.T.S.). This centre, under the supervision of Sanborn, Colangelo, and Perrone, became the major centre for counselling gifted and

talented students in the United States of America (Myers & Pace, 1986). Several research projects involving the social and emotional needs of gifted students were initiated during this time (i.e.: Project Talent, Summer Gifted Child Creativity Classes, Zaffrann & Colengelo, 1979). Unfortunately in 1985, the G.I.F.T.S. program was terminated as result of a lack of funding.

In 1981, James Webb founded the Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted (S.E.N.G.) organization after the heartbreaking suicide of a 17 year old highly intelligent student at the Professional School of Psychology at Wright State University (Myers & Pace, 1986). This organization offered counselling services, workshops, and conferences addressing the needs of gifted individuals.

In 1982, Barbara Kerr, a certified American counsellor and licensed psychologist, established the Guidance Laboratory for Gifted and Talented individuals, at the University of Nebraska, to extend and continue the work of both the G.I.F.T.S. program and the S.E.N.G. organization (Myers & Pace, 1986). Today, Barbara Kerr is working at the University of Kansas in the Education faculty as a professor of counselling psychology and has continued her research in the area of counselling gifted students and gender differences with gifted students (University of Kansas Website, 2007).

In 1979, Linda Kreger Silvermann, a noted published author, licensed psychologist, and former professor at the University of Denver, founded the Gifted Development Centre which serves as a branch of the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development. Silverman founded this centre to further her research in the area of counselling gifted students and to help serve gifted individuals and their families (Gifted Development Centre website, 2007). Additionally since 1992, Sidney M. Moon, an author and professor, has worked to establish the Gifted Education Resource Institute –

Purdue University and has published several studies in the area of counselling gifted students and their families (Purdue University website, 2007).

In 1953, the National Association for Gifted Children (N.A.G.C.) was formed in the United States to educate the public about gifted programs and to train educators and parents. Recently, a specific task force within the N.A.G.C. was created to address the specific social and emotional needs of gifted students, and its efforts have produced significant pieces of literature in the field (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002). Members of the specific task force include professors from several prominent universities in the United States. (National Association of Gifted Children website, 2007).

In Canada, only one specific centre for gifted education exists (University of Calgary website, 2007). It is called the Centre for Gifted Education and has been recognized internationally for excellence in assisting gifted children with their intellectual, social, and emotional development. Located in Calgary, Alberta, the centre provides assistance to gifted individuals and their families through research, teacher training, and outreach programs (University of Calgary Website, 2007). The university also teaches courses on the social and emotional needs of gifted students.

A significant portion of the research on the social, emotional, and counselling needs of gifted students has been documented in the literature by many of the individuals mentioned throughout the previous section. Their findings will be elaborated on throughout the following section of the literature review.

Characteristics of Gifted Adolescents

Asynchronous Development

Asynchrony refers to unequal advancement in various developmental areas in relation to peers of a similar age group. Silverman (1993, 2002) considers asynchronous

development to be a fundamental characteristic of a gifted individual. For instance, a gifted youth may appear emotionally and cognitively advanced, but lag in social development. Consequently, such students may appear "out of sync" with their peers and their classmates of similar age. Unfortunately, "the most asynchronous children are twice as exceptional, as they have the largest disparities in their development" (Silverman, 2002). Such an imbalance in the developmental progress may result in an array of complex emotions displayed by the individual.

Intellectual Attributes

General intellectual ability is demonstrated in a variety of different ways and refers to more than just a high IQ score. Such individuals often have the ability to think more abstractly and to interpret and gain information very rapidly. They may display a motivation to learn by initiating and sustaining conversations around a particular topic, demonstrate intense interests and unique passion for particular subjects, possess acute problem solving abilities, and devise inventive solutions for problems. Additionally, they may have an exceptional ability to recall memorized material, synthesize key ideas, inquire about new information, and utilize reason and logic to create solutions rapidly (Silverman, 1993).

Affective and Personality Attributes

Research in the area of affective attributes yields conflicting results (Neihart, 1999; Moon, Kelly, & Feldhusen, 1997). Some studies indicate that gifted children are "highly motivated, socially mature, open to new experiences, independent, and possess high self-concepts, and a high tolerance for ambiguity" (Keiley, 2002, p. 43; Gentry, Gable, & Springer, 2000), while other studies suggest that gifted students may be "vulnerable to social and emotional difficulties related to their giftedness" (Keiley,

2002, p.43; Jackson 1998; Fiedler, 1999). The current research in the area of affective attributes does not appear consistent, yet the research completed by Dabrowski regarding the social and emotional characteristics of gifted individuals is still cited in current day literature and is still considered influential (Mendaglio, 2002).

Dabrowski was a Polish psychiatrist who, after surviving both world wars, studied and formally observed intellectually gifted children and youth. His research encouraged the development of two theories related to gifted youth. His first theory entitled the "Theory of Positive Disintegration" emphasizes the interplay between cognitive complexity and emotional responsiveness throughout development. He postulates that an individual with greater intellectual capacities is capable of understanding and evaluating a situation on a more intense level, which may result in a heightened emotional response. This intense emotional response is often very characteristic of a gifted youth or adult (Dabrowski & Piecowski, 1977).

Dabrowski's (1977) second theory refers to this emotional phenomenon as the theory of "overexcitabilities." The term "overexcitability" translates from the Polish language to "superstimulatability." This notion of "superstimulatability" portrays many positive and negative connotations for the gifted individual. Dabrowski postulates that there are five different "overexcitabilities" (OE's): Psychomotor, Sensual, Imaginational, Intellectual, and Emotional. He states that a gifted individual typically possess two or more of these "overexcitabilities" (Dabroski & Piecowski, 1977).

Psychomotor Overexcitability refers to an individual's surplus of energy and is marked by rapid speech, desires for fast games, and action. This OE may often present itself within individuals as forms of compulsive talking, impulsive actions, nervous habits, and competitiveness. Sensual Overexcitability denotes an individual's sensory

response to various stimuli. An individual may be prone to seeking sensory pleasure in forms of overindulgence or may experience a heightened level of aesthetic appreciation of art, literature, or beautiful objects. Intellectual Overexcitability indicates a person's desire for introspection, problem solving, and theoretical thinking. Imaginational Overexcitiability refers to an individual's ability to utilize metaphors, animistic and magical thinking, vivid descriptions, and poetic tales to discuss events in their lives. It may often be demonstrated in forms of elaborate dreams and dramatizations. Emotional Overexcitabilities denote an individual's intense feelings both positive and negative. They are frequently displayed as complex emotions and inhibitions, powerful fears and anxieties, extreme attachments and concerns for others, intense self-evaluation and self-judgment, and overwhelming feelings of inadequacy and inferiority (Piechowski, 1979).

Common Psychological Issues of Gifted Adolescents

Characteristics of gifted adolescents may interact to create a unique set of psychological issues. Their personality traits and individual characteristics alone may cause problems for gifted adolescents; however, when their characteristics interact with their environment a novel set of problems may appear. Webb (1994) states there are frequently internal problems and external concerns. The external concerns relate to expectations of others, difficulty adjusting to social and cultural norms, underachievement, acceptance according to chance and location, gender role issues, and family relations (Bickley, 2001, p. 28) and internal concerns relate to personal expectations, perfectionism, and stress.

Stress

There are many reasons for adolescents to experience stress throughout their school years. Researchers have determined that gifted adolescents, in particular because

of their "asynchronous development and unique personality traits," (Silverman, 1993, p. 100) are prone to stress and its ramifications (Kerr, 1991). Researchers list typical "stressors of gifted students" as being loneliness (Kaiser & Berndt, 1985), the need to hide their abilities from others to fit-in with peers (Cross, Coleman, & Terhaar-Yonkers, 1991), exceedingly high expectations and standards (Buescher, 1991; Ford, 1989; Karnes & Oehler-Stinnet, 1986), academic pressures (Yadusky-Holahan & Holahan, 1983), pressure from their home community (Kerr, 1991), and resentment from peers when they meet expectations and succeed (Clinkenbeard, 1991; Ford, 1989).

On a personal note while I was working as a high school counsellor, I watched gifted students become "stressed-out" over competition. They would become obsessed over competing for the highest grade, earning the largest scholarship, and receiving the most recognition from teachers and the school. I have witnessed students become stressed over the pressure involved with selecting a career path, simply because there were too many viable options for them to pursue. My gifted students, in the past, became very anxious over receiving very large scholarship offers from a variety of universities. Often, they received these scholarships because they were involved in numerous curricular and extra-curricular activities. Frequently, they were "over-involved" or "over-committed," because they had a desire not to disappoint. Often times, they sought social perfection, because they tried to be "everything to everyone."

Depression

After sustaining stress and pressure from over-commitment, loneliness, dependence on extrinsic motivation, and extreme competitiveness for an extended period of time, gifted students may become depressed and gradually lose motivation or will-power (Kerr, 1991). Further, researchers demonstrate that a "greater awareness of the

world situation, of injustice, of the way things ought to be, coupled with feelings of powerlessness, can throw gifted young people into despair" (Silverman, 1993, p. 81; Delisle, 1986; Hollingworth, 1942). Webb, Meckstroth, and Tolan, (1982) indicate that such gifted students may be troubled from a "premature form of depression referred to as "'existential depression,' which stems from their intense concerns about basic problems of human existence" (p. 193). This concern for the world, justice, and the realities of life are characteristic of many gifted students. Kerr (1991) suggests that

> 'existential depression' occurs in gifted children and adolescents when their capacity for absorbing information about disturbing events is greater than their capacity to process and understand it.... Some gifted students seem to experience existential depression as a result of having wrestled with concepts with which even the wisest of adults have struggled. The meaning of life, the inevitability of death, and the beginning and end of the universe are all subjects that may lead to depression in the child or adolescent who is attempting to understand them. Perhaps the depression results from the incongruence between the child's developmental stage and the intellectual ability. (p. 138)

Statistics collected regarding depression in gifted students have been documented in the literature. Kaiser and Berndt (1985) completed a study that examined the frequency of emotions experienced by gifted students. They report that pervasive feelings of depression, anger, and loneliness were experienced by one eighth of the 170 gifted students who participated in the project. Furthermore, Berndt, Kaiser, and van Aalst (1982) state that a significant number of gifted students experience what they deem "success depression" comprised of guilt, low self esteem, and helplessness when faced with extreme pressures.

From my previous professional work as a school counsellor, I witnessed many students suffer from depressive feelings when faced with the challenge of maintaining

success for extended periods of time. My students appeared to be more fearful of failing and "letting people down" after continuously being successful in a particular subject or extra-curricular domain than they might with not being successful in the beginning. In essence, they feared the demands of maintaining their perfect performance over taking the risk of attempting a task in the beginning.

Suicide

In 1997, Statistics Canada reported there were 25.4 suicides per 100 000 individuals aged 15 to 19 years old. In 2003, they reported that there were 10.2 suicides per 100 000 individuals within the same age group. While there is a drop in reported suicides, the statistics remain startling when considering suicide attempts and suicide ideation.

The statistics regarding adolescent suicide are concerning. Research has not concluded that gifted students are at a higher risk than their peers for completing suicide (Gust-Brey & Cross, 1999); however, researchers indicate that high school students and college students, who end their lives, are frequently high achievers (Delisle, 1986; Kerr, 1991). In support of this claim, a study completed at 129 American high schools by Hayes and Sloat (1990) indicates that 42 individuals had attempted suicide. Eight of the 42 individuals had been identified by teachers as being gifted high school students.

Kerr and Cohn (2001) in their book, describing their extensive quantitative and qualitative research with gifted boys, indicate that a particular subgroups of gifted boys may be at higher risk for self-harming behaviours including suicide. They state that "highly creative, highly gifted boys comprise one of the at-risk groups" (p. 144) due to the fact they often possess some of the following personality traits thought to be associated with self-harm: perfectionism with self-criticism, pessimism, obsession,

intense sensitivity, and social isolation. Kerr and Cohn (2001) also indicate that another at-risk group of gifted adolescent boys includes those highly creative individuals who are more commonly predisposed to bipolar disorder. Such adolescents will demonstrate "wild, prolonged rushes of euphoria and creativity followed by a rapid decline into soul-crushing depression" (p. 145) and are at a greater risk of both intentional and accidental death. A final subgroup of gifted boys discussed by Kerr and Cohn (2001) who are at a higher risk for depression and suicide are gifted homosexual and bisexual boys. This was further documented in a study by Peterson and Rischar (2000) who examined the experience of gifted gay, lesbian, and bisexual youths and suggested that they are also at a higher risk for depression and suicide.

Perfectionism

A sense of perfectionism and its resulting problems have been consistently associated with giftedness in the literature (Silverman, 1993, Kerr, 1991, Kerr & Cohn, 2001, Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Delisle (1986) suggests that gifted adolescents are at high risk for suicide because of their overpowering sensitivity and their controlling sense of perfectionism.

Kerr (1991) defines perfectionism as

> a complex of characteristics and behaviours including compulsiveness with regard to work habits, overconcern for details, unrealistically high standards for self and others, indiscriminate acquiescence to external evaluation, and rigid rountines. (p. 141)

While Neihart (2002) defines perfectionism as

> a multidimensional construct often described as a combination of thoughts and behaviours associated with high expectations for self and others. (p. 95)

Neihart (2002) adds that in "its negative or neurotic form, perfectionism is associated in the clinical literature on general populations with a wide range of medical and emotional problems, including depression and suicide" (p. 95).

In an attempt to further understand the dynamics of perfectionism, Hewitt and Flett (1990) conceptualize three dimension of perfectionism: (a) self-oriented perfectionism (setting unrealistic standards for one's self), (b) socially prescribed perfectionism (individual's belief that others have unrealistic standards that must be reached in order to obtain recognition and acceptance from self and others), and (c) other-oriented perfectionism (placing unrealistic standards on others).

Delisle and Galbraith (2002), from their personal observations and qualitative research with gifted students, indicate that "perfectionism is not a good thing" (p. 64) and suggest that it differs dramatically from a healthy "pursuit of excellence" (p. 64). They describe perfectionism as meaning "you can never fail, you always need approval, and if you come second - you are a loser" (p. 64) and they describe "the pursuit of excellence" as "taking risks, trying new things, growing, changing, and sometimes failing" (p. 64). Delisle and Galbraith (2002) state that intelligence, high expectations, and misdirected perfectionism may cause such gifted students to be caught in a cycle of hopeless scenarios in many dimensions of their lives – work, family, peers, and school. Such a "cycle of hopelessness" driven by perfectionism, may be experienced when a student is caught in a perpetual loop of criticism with no apparent route leading out. Such a cycle may lead adolescent students towards a number of concerning psychological risk factors – depression, withdrawal from social situations, and even suicide.

After reading this literature, I have a deepened understanding of a poem that was given to me by a student a number of years ago. The cycle of hopelessness became clear in my mind when I read this poem.

I stare at the darkness inside myself.
My mind races, running only to stand still.
Searching, I see several pathways, but none leading out.
I lie motionless on a bed of nails.
You gave it your all, but I wanted more.
I keep stabbing at the night,
Hoping he'll soon bleed the light.

The literature also helped me to remember how some students who were perfectionists struggled to begin certain challenging tasks. Certain students who were perfectionists felt it was easier to procrastinate, than to begin with the fear of having to complete the task without flaw.

Greenspon (2002), a researcher and educator, details how a perfectionist may act, think, and feel from his years of working in classrooms with gifted students. He suggests that perfectionists may "overcommit" themselves, act competitively, become carried away with details, appear never satisfied with work, refer to themselves as "stupid" when a task has been completed imperfectly, or wish to be in control of everything. Perfectionist may think there is no point to doing work that cannot be completed perfectly. They may think they are awful people, if their work is not perfect. They may think they are never "good enough" (Greenspoon, 2002). Furthermore, he suggests that perfectionists may feel embarrassed about making mistakes, disgusted with themselves when an error is discovered in their work, anxious when communicating to others, exhausted and unable to relax, fearful of rejection, and guilty about disappointing people.

According to research on adolescent suicide, Donaldson, Spirito, and Farnette (2000) suggest that perfectionism can serve adaptive functions as it encourages goal-

orientation and pleasure from accomplishments. It can also serve as a maladaptive function, as it promote a sense of failure when personal standards are not obtained. When perfectionism served as a maladaptive function it was found to be significantly related to hopelessness (Donaldson, et al., 2000).

Relationship Problems and Social Isolation

Erik Erikson (1964) believes that adolescence is a developmental stage of life that witnesses a psychosocial crisis involving a conflict between "identity and role confusion". When an adolescent successfully resolves the conflict at this stage, the characteristics of dependability and loyalty are established. When the conflict is not successfully resolved, the adolescent may not develop a clear and integrated sense of self and sense of personal values. From Erikson's psychosocial perspective, adolescence is a difficult stage of life that can have consequences for subsequent development.

Reis and Renzulli (2004) identify further developmental considerations in view of the research produced by the National Association for Gifted Children and the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented. Both of these American organizations indicated that "high-ability students are generally as well adjusted as any other group of youngsters" (p. 119); however, the research suggests that such students can face "a number of situations that may constitute sources of risk to their social and emotional development" (p. 119). These challenges to their social and emotional development may include unsupportive educational, social, and home environments.

In support of this claim, Kerr and Cohn (2001) indicate that highly creative boys may be at risk for social isolation because of their creative ways that are often considered "non-traditional". They suggest that such non-traditional behaviours may cause others to be uncomfortable and cause peers to withdraw from social interactions with gifted

individuals. Such situations may cause gifted students to feel a sense of loneliness and experience social isolation.

Significant issues facing gifted students in peer relationships were reviewed by Webb et al. (1982). The group reported that many difficult social interactions occur because of gifted students' uneven development. Webb, et al. (1982) suggest that gifted youth need a variety of peers that will match their physical, intellectual, and social levels. Further, Kerr (1991) indicates that gifted youths may be so cognitively advanced that they no longer "fit-in" with the peers of similar chronological age. Such advanced intellectual capabilities tend to persuade gifted students to associate with older individuals that may expose them to more complex adult social problems and societal conflicts (Neihart, 2002; Gross, 1993).

When gifted students experience difficulties self-regulating (being overly empathetic or overly sensitive), balancing expectations and pressures from peers, teachers, and family members, being overly reflective, and consistently searching for meaning they may also have trouble in their peer and social relationships (Silverman, 1993). Additionally, gifted adolescents may feel isolated and consequently mask their abilities with peers. They may experience conflicts between accomplishments and "affiliation needs" and develop coping mechanisms that involve publicly and/or personally rejecting their talents to handle social condemnation (Galbraith, 1983).

I watched this particular phenomenon happen on a number of occasions throughout my professional experience. One particular student, who I remember well, would never correctly answer the question, "How did you do on the test?" He would lie or humorously comment, "not as well as I could have if it had of been an open book test, Ms. T." When tests were returned, he never looked at his marks but instead quickly

placed the tests in his book bag and apparently evaluated his own performance when he was alone. He always earned a grade that was in the high nineties but simply chose to remain a peer rather than becoming the meter stick against which peers measure their own success.

What are Gifted Students' Perspectives?

In a recent review of literature on giftedness, Coleman (2001) concludes that "the life of students in special programs from the perspective of students has not been a frequent subject of study in the field of gifted and talented child education" (p. 164). Although students in such programs have been researched, we have yet to learn from the perspective of the students themselves (Coleman, 2001). This section of my literature review examines the few studies that have attempted to present academically gifted students' perspectives, describe the experience of being a gifted student, and offer ways to assist. I found no specific research concerning the experience of hope for gifted adolescents.

Silverman (1993), from research within her clinical work, indicates the most prominent concerns of gifted children appear to be: feeling different, confusion about the meaning of giftedness, lack of understanding from others, fear of failure, perfectionism, and existential depression (p. 86). These are each experiences that in and of themselves would challenge an individual's hope for the future. Galbraith (1985) after surveying 400 gifted students, states that the "Eight Great Gripes" of the gifted student are

1.) The stuff we are doing in school is too easy and it's boring.
2.) Parents, teachers, and friends expect us to be perfect and to do our best all the time.
3.) Friends who really understand us are few and far between.
4.) Lots of our coursework is irrelevant.
5.) Peers often tease us about being smart.

6.) We feel overwhelmed by the number of things we can do in life.
7.) We feel too different and alienated.
8.) We worry a lot about world problems and feel helpless (p. 15).

In addition to the above mentioned findings, a number of qualitative studies and books were discovered that explored the experience of being a gifted high school student. Jim Delisle, a Professor of Education and teacher, authored a book entitled *Gifted Children Speak Out* in 1984. This ground breaking book details the stories of students who are gifted and between the ages of 6 and 13. In the book, they discuss what giftedness means to them and how giftedness is defined. Students report on various experiences relating to giftedness and gifted educational programs. Such students discuss peer relationships, family pressures, and experiences in gifted educational programs. Delisle's (1984) work primarily addresses how gifted children identify with their giftedness.

Four years later, Kerr, Colangelo, and Gaeth (1988) examined gifted adolescents' perceptions of their giftedness and their views on giftedness in personal, academic, and social areas through the use of an open-ended questionnaire. Their results indicate that gifted adolescents' views of their giftedness "were not unidimensional" (p. 245) but were varied. In their study, the gifted student participants believe that other people respond more adversely to their giftedness than they did themselves. Kerr, et al. (1988) also report that gifted adolescents believe their giftedness negatively affects their social relationships with peers; however, they did report that the gifted students felt that their giftedness positively affects their school and academic performance. The authors use five broad categories to highlight the results: (a) the meaning of giftedness, (b)

advantages of being gifted, (c) disadvantages of being gifted, (d) affirmation of giftedness, and (e) effects of the gifted label.

Kerr's et al. (1988) study was expanded upon in 1994 by Manaster, Chan, Watt, and Wiehe (1994). Manaster's, et al. (1994) study, which targets gifted students attending the state of Texas Summer Governor's School program, partially replicates the original study investigating the perception of gifted adolescents in that another open-ended questionnaire was composed and presented to students. The study expands the investigation by "tailoring the questions to the individuals'" (p. 176) personal experiences and by varying the scoring scheme for improved specificity (i.e. - asking students what giftedness means to them specifically, rather than what giftedness means in general). Through the use of this improved questionnaire, Manaster, et al. conclude that giftedness is indeed "multifaceted" and that many gifted students realize that many advantages and disadvantages exist in connection to the label of being gifted.

In 1988, Coleman and Cross used qualitative methods to investigate whether being gifted was considered a "social handicap" by gifted students. In this phenomenological study, 15 gifted adolescent students we interviewed. Gifted student participants in this study believed that teachers did treat them differently as compared to their average ability peers. Interestingly, the participants also reported that the teachers were their peers and their best friends in school.

Further, Coleman and Cross's (1993) questionnaire based study examined the social cognition of sixty-five gifted students who attended the state of Tennessee Governor's School Program. In this study, the data collected were analyzed using the Stigma of Giftedness Paradigm (Coleman, 1985) based on the following tenets: (a) gifted and talented students want to have normal social interactions, (b) gifted students believe

that people treat them differently when aware of their giftedness, and (c) gifted students can influence how others interact with them by manipulating the information others have about them through various coping strategies.

Results from this study indicate that gifted high school students believed they are similar to other students on a social level, but that they differ from other non-gifted students behaviourally. For instance, the authors note that their gifted respondents became "bored with small talk, preferred to work independently, and were more serious about learning" than other students (p. 39). The results from this study also report that 77% of the gifted students contended they were different intellectually. Teachers, peers, and other classmates viewed them differently than non-gifted students according to the gifted students interviewed, and results stated that gifted students often "forego comments to avoid alienating others" from the peer group (p. 39). Around 60 % of the gifted subjects in the study stated that their schools' atmosphere and environment prevented them from being themselves to varying degrees.

In 1995, a follow-up study was completed by Cross and Coleman that targeted gifted students who participated in the Tennessee Governor's School Programs. Students were selected to participate in the state school program on the basis of their performance across seven criteria: (a) tests of ability, (b) tests of achievement, (c) grade-point average, (d) recommendations from two teachers who represent the content focus of the school being applied for, (e) recommendations from a guidance counsellor, (f) extracurricular activities pertinent to the content focus, and (g) student-authored essays explaining the benefits of attending the school. In the study, psychosocial diversity among gifted students who considered themselves to be the "same" socially as their peers (in mixed ability programs) and who considered themselves to be "different" socially from their

peers (in mixed ability programs) were compared. Results suggest that the "same" group may have been exaggerating their similarities in an effort to integrate socially" with their peers into school environment (p. 186). This study further articulates that psychosocial developmental differences exist among gifted adolescents (Cross, T. & Coleman, L., (1995). The authors conclude their study by reiterating the point established by Tannenbaum in 1983 that "some of our most capable students would rather underachieve and be popular than receive honour status and receive social ostracism" (Tannenbuam, 1983, p. 466).

Further information that explores ways to assist gifted students was outlined by Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen in a book in 1993 entitled *Talented Teenagers: The Roots of Success and Failure*. Powerfully, this book describes a study involving 200 talented teenagers that was conducted to better understand what "makes it possible, given similar environmental conditions, for some teenagers to continue cultivating their talent while other equally gifted teens give up and never develop their abilities" (p. 1). The study describes talented teenagers as students who were placed in accelerated or advanced programs and who were thought by their teachers to have significant potential at "superior levels of proficiency" in a particular field of study (Mathematics, Science, Music, Athletics, and Art). Data were collected through Experience Sampling Methods (EMS) where students were asked to chart the experiences of daily life and describe their thoughts and emotions. As such, rich descriptions of gifted teenagers in typical everyday teenage situations and scenarios were provided throughout the book. In narrative form, stories were shared that described how gifted and talented students manage the pressures of being talented in high school. The authors of this study suggested that appropriate

challenges be provided to gifted and talented students in order to sustain motivation and promote self-discipline.

Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993) suggested that significant adult role models, who possess similar interests, serve as key figures in the lives of gifted students. In a similar vein, Snyder et al. (2003) suggest that "high-hope teachers" can have a significant impact on the lives of their students. In establishing a classroom environment that is trusting, supporting, and accepting, teachers will support students to be able to take risks and actively work towards achieving their own personal and academic goals.

To explore the experience of being a student at a public residential high school for gifted youth, Coleman (2001) conducted a study using ethnographic and phenomenological methods. In order to attend the two-year residential school, chosen as a research site by Coleman (2001), students were selected based on an application consisting of a standardized test, four recommendations, and an essay. To conduct the research, Coleman lived in the residential school (referred to as the Greenhouse Institution or GI) for one academic year and participated in many social activities (Birthday Parties, Club Meetings, Meals in the Cafeteria, Student Meetings) as well as school administrational activities (Staff Meetings, Teacher Team Meetings). After his experience at the GI residential school, Coleman (2001) documents how students' social relationships appear to be "more open, inclusive, and fluid" (p. 164) when compared to other high schools he has researched. He also shares how gifted students indicate that they truly felt at "home" in this controlled environment (p. 169).

In 2002, Schultz completed a phenomenological study that examined the experiences of two underachieving gifted learners whose needs were not being satisfied

by the schools. These two gifted students were deemed "underachievers" by school officials, who based their perceptions of underachievement strictly on inadequate school performance given the students' perceived abilities. The study focused on the students' perceptions, expectations, and experiences as learners. Results from this qualitative study indicated that these gifted students who were underachieving wanted their schools to be reflections of life where all stakeholders (students, teachers, administrators) could work collaboratively to create curriculum to truly engage all students. Furthermore, that these gifted students often saw themselves as "stuck on an academic merry-go-round whirling by the same content over and over" (p. 218) which eventually eroded their desire to learn. In summary, the two gifted participants wanted to have input into their curriculum and wanted their teachers to genuinely know them as individuals, not simply as numbers reflecting their grades.

What are the Programs for Gifted Students in the Province of New Brunswick?

The Province of New Brunswick Department of Education supports and encourages the implementation of a wide variety of gifted programs in the elementary, middle, and senior schools (Department of Education Province of New Brunswick, 1997). Such programs and programming options for gifted students include (a) enrichment (Renzulli, 1978), (b) curriculum-compacting (Renzulli, 1978), (c) acceleration (Marland, 1972), (d) independent studies (Feldhusen, 1992), (e) mentoring (Marland, 1972), (f) mini-courses on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), (g) instructional opportunities outside the regular classroom (Stanley, 1974), (h) Advanced Placement Programs (Stanley, 1974), and (i) Autonomous Learners Programs (Renzulli, 1978) (Department of Education Province of New Brunswick, 1997). Although the

Department of Education encourages the implementation of such programs in the schools, the extent and the manner in which the programs are practiced in the various districts and individual schools varies dramatically (Province of New Brunswick, Department of Education, 1997). Additionally, gifted New Brunswick students are encouraged to apply and to participate in national programs, such as Shad Valley, that have been designed to enhance educational experiences for gifted students.

Interesting in my previous professional experience as an enrichment co-ordinator at a high school in New Brunswick, I observed that the majority of the programs outlined above require that students initially achieve a high academic average (> 85 %), maintain a high academic achieve (> 85 %), and receive continual positive documentation from teachers and parents supporting their participation in order to remain in the program. Furthermore, I witnessed several gifted students struggle to remain in such programs and to gain admittance into others. This often occurred because their entrance into and removal from such enriching programs was based largely on their ongoing academic performance. These restrictive guidelines placed students in high pressured situations and often caused stress in the lives of students.

Chapter Summary

This literature review examined four main bodies of information as background to my study of hope for achieving gifted high school students. Various definitions of hope and hope theories were discussed throughout the chapter. As well, potential social and emotional needs of gifted adolescents, gifted students' perspectives, and gifted programs in the Province of New Brunswick were presented. Each of these areas represents a critical component to understanding the experience of hope for students who achieved academically throughout high school.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER 3

Throughout this chapter, I elaborate on my epistemological stance for this study, discuss my autoethnographic methodological approach, review my data collection and analysis procedures, describe evaluative procedures for this form of study, and outline my ethical considerations for the study.

My Epistemological Stance

In research, it is a philosophical conviction that directs our theoretical perspective, manages our methodology, and, ultimately, selects our research methods (Crotty, 1998). Espistemology, according to Crotty (1998), can be best defined as "a way of understanding and explaining how we know what we know" (p. 3).

Constructionism is the epistemology that guides my research study. Such an epistemological stance supports the notion of relativism, which implies that I do not believe there is an "objective truth waiting for us to discover" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Rather, I contend that "truth, or meaning, comes into existence in and out of our engagement with realities in our world" (p. 8) and that "meaning is not discovered, but constructed" (p. 9). From this stance, I believe that an understanding of our experiences is created not "in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, and language" (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197) with others and the world.

My Autoethnographic Methodological Approach

I loved my teaching and school counselling years, and I thoroughly enjoyed my students. Once I had decided to complete my doctoral dissertation in the area of hope and academically gifted achievers, the last thing that I wanted to do was to become involved in a research process that actively sought to "simplify, categorize, slice, and

dice" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) my experiences and the stories of my gifted students. It was within this emotional and determined frame of mind that I explored my methodological options and decided upon completing an autoethnography.

Thankfully, I was pointed in a fruitful direction and began reading about autoethnography as a qualitative methodological approach. When I learned that a research methodology existed that allowed and even encouraged the researcher to "pay attention to their physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737) and utilize "systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience they have lived through" (p. 737), I was sold, committed to my research project, but scared to death. Never in my academic career had I ever contemplated being vulnerable and discussing past experiences that still evoke a great deal of emotion and passion. Looking back upon my research, I could have chosen no other option for this study, and my reasons for this choice will become even more evident at the beginning of the fourth chapter.

Autoethnography

Reed-Danahay (1997) defines autoethnography as "a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts". It is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Such an account is typically documented in "first-person voice" and may present in a "variety of forms – short stories, poetry, fiction novels, photographic essays, personal essays, journals, fragmented and layered writing, and social science prose" (p. 739). Autoethnographies are engrained in the belief that "ethnography is always a depiction of the ethnographer's experience of a

particular people as encountered in the fieldwork" and as such an experience is one of "shared subjectivity" (Angrosion, 1998, p. 265).

As a research methodology autoethnography may be situated under the umbrella term of narrative constructionistic approaches to qualitative inquiries. Researchers who use these approaches to qualitative inquiry believe that "narrative is the primary way through which humans organize their experiences into meaningful episodes" (Polkinghorn, 1988, p. 1) and that through stories or narratives an experience can be better understood and synthesized by its audience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). According to McLeod (2003), autoethnographies fall within the domain of "personal experience methods." Personal experience methods are based in a "sociological tradition and combine the use of autobiography and ethnography" (p. 83). Richardson (2003) states that autoethnographies are both a "creative analytic practice ethnography" (p. 509) and an "evocative representation" (p. 512).

David Hayano is commonly viewed as the "originator of the term" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739) autoethnography, but in fact, researchers suggest the concept of autoethnography has been in existence in scholarly literature since the 1970's (Berger, 2001). Berger (2001) suggests that narrative autoethnographies are a "natural extension of the elements already ingrained in the ethnographic tradition" (p. 506). In this sense, ethnographers have traditionally been attempting to determine where they "stand in their own depictions of those they study" (p. 506), where their "voice" was able to be heard, and how ethnography can be used to research the research process itself. Van Mannen (1988) suggests that ethnography "rests on the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others" (p. ix). In the 1960's and 1970's, it was common place for ethnographers to

detail their "memoirs" in separate documents to keep the lines between "public and private, and subjective and objective" (Tedlock, 1991, p. 76).

As researchers and theorists began to theorize about whether or not objectivity was theoretically or practically ever possible, the move towards "experimental texts and first-person accounts" (Berger, 2001, p. 506) began, and the gates for a more literary style of qualitative writing "that would allow for multiple interpretations from the researcher, participants, and readers" (p. 506) were opened. Additionally during the 1970's, an ethnographic methodology shift occurred from "participant observation to observation of participation" (Berger, 2001, p. 506). As such, the research concentration of many ethnographers, in that time, began focusing on the researcher's own experience of participating in the fieldwork. In continuing with the trend, Berger (2001) states that "when we write an ethnography, we are trying to capture a segment of time in the lives of those we are observing" (p. 507) such that it allows others to understand important aspects of what was happening. McLeod (2003) suggests that autoethnography is a form of "experiential research" that has not been applied or used within the field of counselling and psychotherapy but that it has a "huge potential contribution to make" (p. 140).

For my research, I want to capture a specific period of time in my life and in the lives of gifted high school academic achievers in order to document our stories. While, I was a gifted high school student, I chose not to achieve academically throughout high school. As such, the way I lived through high school in New Brunswick differs from the participants; however, several autoethnographies have been completed in a similar manner where the primary researcher does not share the experience of the participants (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1996; Evans, 2007; Scanlon, 2005; Pierce, 2006, Ellis, 2007). In completing the research in this fashion, my voice as a researcher engaging

with the stories from the participants will also be documented. This way, the research offers a multi-vocal text describing accounts of hope by gifted achieving adolescents and by me, as a school counsellor and now as a researcher. Aspects of gifted education in New Brunswick also thread through this multilayered text, as these represent an influential context for understanding gifted education programs in New Brunswick high schools.

Data Collection Procedures

Throughout my research, there were two different approaches utilized to help guide the data collection procedures. First, the focus of my project was on a particular culture, that of academically achieving gifted high school students who participated in gifted education classes and programs. Second, I used my own experiences as a school counsellor and looked "more deeply at self-other interactions" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 740). In other words, I reflectively considered my own experiences with the gifted academic achievers with whom I worked throughout my professional years in New Brunswick. From this approach, my own experience was a critical component and was "actually studied along with other participants" (p. 740). These personal narratives from my professional days in New Brunswick help to contextualize the participants' stories and serve to illuminate the similarities and differences of the culture under observation within my study (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I will lay my own stories as a school counsellor of gifted achieving high school students alongside the participants' stories, creating a dialogue between my own reflexive moments and their narratives.

Autoethnographic narratives consist of more than the researcher's opinions (Duncan, 2004). Often, they are supported by other forms of data that can "confirm and triangulate those opinions" (Duncan, 2004, p. 3). Richardson (2000) refers to this

process not as triangulation, but rather as "crystallization" ("p. 13). Richardson suggests that a triangle is too "rigid, fixed, and two-dimensional" an object to represent such a process. A "crystal" that "combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach" (p. 13), according to Richardson, serves as a better image to represent the procedures. According to Duncan (2004), common methods of data collection that may help to crystallize the data may include participant observation, reflective writing, interviewing, and gathering documents, and/or artifacts. A variety of data collection procedures exist in relation to autoethnographies (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, Duncan, 2004). For this study, I used three different procedures to complete this research project (a) retrospective participant observation (Duncan, 2004), (b) interactive interviewing (Ellis, Keisinger & Tillman-Healy, 1997), and (c) systematic introspection (Ellis, 1991) to help to crystallize the data.

First, I completed a form of participant observation (Duncan, 2004; McLeod, 2001). Since I was a high school counsellor who worked with gifted students in the school system, I documented my retrospective ethnographic observations from that period in my professional career. Such retrospective observations were documented in my personal journal and were analyzed. Fictitious names were used to ensure that identifiable features were not shared. These participant observations take narrative form throughout following chapters.

Second, I conducted interactive interviews (Ellis, Keisinger & Tillmann-Healy, 1997) with academically gifted high school students who graduated from New Brunswick high schools and who participated in gifted programs. I completed two in-depth interviews with each of the participants throughout the summer of 2005. The majority of

these interviews were conducted face-to-face in New Brunswick with the participants; however, due to the fact the participants were living in the Province of New Brunswick and in Quebec and I returned to Alberta prior to the completion of the interviews, I finished the remaining interviews over the telephone with the participants. More specifically, I conducted a total of six initial interviews (5 face to face interviews & 1 telephone interview) and six follow-up interviews (4 face-to-face interviews & 2 telephone interviews).

All interactive interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. (I personally transcribed the interviews.) The participants had the opportunity to provide informant feedback and to complete reliability checks of their transcripts after each interview (Ellis, 1999). Their recollection of events during their high school years and current notions helped to build the verisimilitude of my study. The conversation guide/interview questions can be found in Appendix #2 of this research inquiry.

Third, I completed my own form of systematic introspection or self-introspection (Ellis, 1991). I reflected on my experiences as a school counsellor and the experiences of the participants, their conversations, and my perspectives on their accounts (Ellis, 1991. p. 26). Such reflections, prior to the interviews and during the research process, were documented in my personal journal and were later analyzed. Additionally, a colleague interviewed me about my experiences as a student and as a school counsellor. This process helped to further my own understanding and helped to deepen the systematic introspection. My own interview responses were transcribed and employed during the inquiry as part of the data for the autoethnography.

Participants

I began my research study hoping to have three to four participants; however, I was very fortunate to have a relatively large number of students volunteer to serve as participants. As such, I had six participants in this research project and formulated an additional "waiting-list" for possible future endeavors. Participants for my research project were selected according to an established criteria listed in the following section. At the time of the interviews, they ranged in age from 20-23.

The established criteria for participants in the study were as follows. The individual must have:

- been an academically achieving gifted student in a New Brunswick high school. (Such students will have been identified by the school as being academic achievers, participating in a variety of school enrichment programs such as Shad Valley, Certificate of Academic Excellence and Community Merit, and/or Autonomous Learners, and obtaining an overall high school average in the nineties.)
- graduated from a New Brunswick high school within the last five years.
- an interest in completing this study.
- an ability to clearly articulate their thoughts.

In order to obtain participants for my study, I spoke with my former gifted students who achieved academically, participated in a variety of Provincial Enrichment activities, and formed friendships with a number of academically achieving gifted students across the Province of New Brunswick. I used a form of "snowball" purposeful sampling for identifying prospective participants who met the established criteria for my study (Anderson, 1998). In order to remove the risk of having a dual-relationship (acting

as both researcher and former counsellor) with my research participants, I did not work as a researcher with my former student clients.

Data Analysis Procedures

My data analysis procedures were informed by what Denzin and Lincoln (1994) referred to bricolage. A

> bricoleur uses the tools of his or her methodological trade, deploying whatever strategies, methods or empirical materials as are at hand... If new tools have to be invented, or pieced together, then the researcher will do this. The choice of which tools to use, which research practices to employ, is not set in advance ... [but depends upon] what is available in the context, and what the researcher can do in that setting (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.2-3).

With this image in mind and examining the data that was collected, I remained flexible as to how I conducted the data analysis procedures. In order to facilitate this process, I became well informed as to how data analysis procedures have been completed in seminal autoethnographic studies (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Duncan, 2004; Ellis, 2002). Bricolage as a data analysis procedure fits well within the autoethnographic traditions.

As the researcher is the primary tool of the inquiry, McLeod (2001) suggests that the process of data analysis and interpretation is on-going throughout the research procedures, rather than accomplished at a particular stage. Indeed, I actively considered the data throughout my study and on-going interpretations. Furthermore, I employed other data analysis techniques throughout the study described by Mcleod (2001). I "wrote memos and jotted down ideas throughout the course of the research" (McLeod, 2001, p. 142). I also constructed "a preliminary summary of the material as a whole" (McLeod, 2001, p.142) that I documented my thoughts in my research journal.

Reissman (1993) provided a detailed account of how to conduct a narrative analysis that proved to be very useful throughout my study. Her narrative approach has been constructed around the following list of principles. I borrowed key ideas from her principles to help conduct my data analysis.

> 1.) An interview schedule is used that encourages informants to tell stories.
> 2.) Interview data are collected from a number of informants to enable an understanding of different experiences and themes.
> 3.) A few key informants are selected whose stories can be viewed as 'typical' of broader themes in the data.
> 4.) The interview material from these key informants is subjected to detailed transcription and closer reading.
> 5.) Exemplar narratives from within these interviews are selected for use in a paper or report.
> 6.) The paper or report is written around the intact narrative text, which is responded to in full.
> 7.) The goal of the analysis is to assist the reader to understand the meaning of the informant's experience. (Reismann, 1993)

Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggest that the researcher should "'ground' (p. 758) the analysis in the participants' understandings, as well as their own" (p. 758). As such, they state that the interpretations should be documented in forms of narratives that are written with "thick description" and a description of the group of individuals around whom the study is constructed. I followed Ellis and Bochner's (2000) suggestion of grounding the analysis of the participants in my own, as I documented their experiences with rich description but also provided my own understandings.

Evaluative, Verification, and Legitimacy Procedures

My epistemological stance directed the methods used throughout my research. In addition to directing the selected methods, my epistemological perspective shapes how I verify and evaluate the ultimate worth as a research project. I hold and support a social constructionistic view of how knowledge is derived; therefore, the evaluation methods

that I use to judge the worth of this study are rooted in this perspective. The following principles guide my approach to legitimacy of this research text.

First, Ellis (1999) states that validity or truth value refers to whether or not the writing creates verisimilitude. Verisimilitude is judged to be present when the writing "evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible". Additionally, Ellis (1999) states that validity can also be evaluated by "whether it [the work] helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers or even your own" (p. 674). As a counsellor, I know this to be true for my study as it helps me to work more meaningfully with my current day students.

Second, in discussing reliability in the context of autoethnographic work, Ellis (1999) documents that there is "no such thing as orthodox reliability in autoethnographic research" (p. 674), but rather researchers can perform reliability checks with their participants. In my study, reliability checks were completed when I took the transcripts back to the participants and "gave them a chance to comment, add materials, change their minds, and even offer their interpretations" (p. 674).

Third, in terms of generalizability, Ellis (1999) indicates that although it is important in an autoethnographic account, generalizability is not considered in the typical fashion. From her perspective, "a story's generalizability is constantly being tested by readers as they ask if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know" (p. 674). Others will evaluate the generalizability of my study by examining whether or not my study speaks to them and shows them how gifted students experience hope. Throughout the process of my research, a peer/colleague read drafts and offered comments.

In addition to those already mentioned, Richardson (2000) details five factors that she commonly utilizes when reviewing personal narrative papers or creative analytic practice ethnographies. I subscribed to these principles as well when evaluating the worth of this study. The techniques that Richardson (2000) uses to evaluate a qualitative paper and to judge the validity of a document are (a) substantive contribution (Does the study contribute to our understanding of social life?), (b) aesthetic merit (Does this piece succeed aesthetically?), (c) reflexivity (Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view?), (d) impactfulness (Does this affect me emotionally and-or intellectually?), and (e) expresses a reality (Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience?) (Richardson, 2000, p. 15-16).

Common Criticisms of Autoethnographic Methods and Verification Procedures

Autoethnographic research "has not yet enjoyed the popularity and respect of its ethnographic predecessors" (Duncan, 2004, p.1). As a qualitative methodology, it has been primarily criticized in two distinct areas. First, it has been criticized for being self-indulgent, introspective, and individualized as it uses the "self to produce research" (Holt, p. 17). According to Reed-Danahay (1997), this form of personal and emotional expression is the essence of solid autoethnographic writing. From my perspective, I believe that we all can learn from our experiences in life. I firmly believe that it is our duty as professionals to be reflective with our practice and to share what knowledge we have gathered over the course of own development. Such beliefs are consistent with a social constructionist epistemology that states that multiple truths exist, and that our knowledge is created through interactions with other individuals and the world. Hence, from a social constructionist perspective, we acknowledge our role in the creation of

knowledge and seek to share our perspectives honestly with the recognition that all knowledge is created meanings between individuals.

Second, authoethnographic studies are commonly criticized as being illegitimate forms of research because they are not verified in a typical fashion (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Such criticisms frequently stem from the fact that the typical criteria used to pass judgment on qualitative studies (i.e. credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability) may not be suitable or appropriate with autoethnographic studies as they support a more positivistic epistemological conception of the "truth" (Garratt & Hodkinson, 1999; Sparkes, 2000; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Holt, 2003).

Ethical Considerations for the Study

The discussion regarding ethical standards within my study is subdivided into a variety of different subheadings. The following topics are discussed throughout this section: Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) – Code of Ethics, consent, anonymity, counselling, and debriefing. Due to the nature of this human-subject study, it was reviewed by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board and was officially approved in July of 2005.

Canadian Psychological Association – Code of Ethics

The *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (3rd Edition)* (CPA, 2000) was designed to regulate the activities a psychologist engages in by virtue of being a psychologist. While, I aspired to all ethical principles established in the Code of Ethics, there are a few principles and ethical standards that I have highlighted as they were of most specific concern to my research study.

In particular, I abided by Principle I: Respect for the Dignity of Persons and demonstrated appropriate respect for my research participants and work to safeguard their

dignity as individuals to the best of my ability. I heeded the notions of Principle II: Responsible Caring and demonstrated a concern for the welfare of the participants. I followed Principle III: Integrity in Relationships and had open and honest relationships with my research participants, and I did not have dual-relationships with the participants. Additionally, I adhered to Principle IV: Responsibility to Society. I engaged in practices, such as peer-review and direct supervision that ultimately worked towards safeguarding society from false research information (CPA, 2000). Furthermore, the following ethical issues were most germane to my study.

Consent

> The most fundamental principle for ethical acceptability is that of informed consent: the involved participants must be informed of the nature and purpose of the research, its risks and benefits, and must consent to participate without coercion (Anderson, 1998, p. 18).

To ensure ethical consent, all participants of this study received an information letter (CPA (2000) - Ethical Standards I.16, I, 17) regarding the study's parameters and a voluntary consent form. The forms were signed and all questions were addressed prior to commencing the study (CPA (2000) - Ethical Standard I.20, I.21). Furthermore, at no point throughout this study were the participants coerced into completing my study (CPA (2000) - Ethical Standards I.27, I.28) and they had the option to discontinue at any point, if they so desired (CPA (2000) - Ethical Standard I.30, II.37).

In addition to establishing informed consent at the onset of my study, I also relied upon Munhall's (1988) explanation of "process consenting" and Grout's (2004) concept of "negotiated consent". Process consenting and negotiated consent are more appropriate for qualitative inquiries because potential risks can never be completely predicted at the beginning of an emergent study, and unforeseen concerns may become apparent

throughout the course of the inquiry. Process consenting encourages the researcher to obtain consent throughout the data collection procedures, which ultimately provides the participants with more protection and freedom of choice (Munhall, 1988). "Negotiated consent" is a heuristic activity that encourages dialogue and discussion between the researcher and participant throughout the research procedures (Grout, 2004). These techniques were employed throughout this research study.

Anonymity

I made every effort to protect the anonymity of participants. I used pseudonyms while reporting the data. Real names were not used when describing participants, schools, former school officials, or school counsellors. Any identifying information, such as names, names of places, and specific details that could be identifying were removed or masked throughout the research process. Additionally, the raw data, journals and transcripts were filed, organized, and stored in a safe and secure location (CPA (2000) - Ethical Standard I.45).

Counselling and Debriefing

If at any juncture in the research process the participants felt "uncomfortable" with the subject material, I would have stopped the interview process. Further, debriefing occurred at the end point of each interview and at the summary of the interviewing process (CPA (2000) - Ethical Standards II.1, II.23). Free counselling was always available to the participants from a reputable outside source in order to deal with any issues raised by participants. This service was secured in advance of launching my study; however, no participants made use of this offering.

Chapter Summary

The research focus for this project addresses the subsequent research question: *Acknowledging my personal and professional experiences as a school counsellor in my research project, how do I understand the experiences of gifted New Brunswick students and their hope as I engage with them and their stories from their high school years?* Adhering to a constructionist epistemological stance, it has been designed as an autoethnography, which integrates multiple narratives from my own experiences and those of the participants. It is my hope that this autoethnographic research study will provided valuable insights into the lives of gifted adolescents and into the construct of hope. It may also be advantageous to counsellors, psychologists, parents, teachers, school officials, and academically achieving gifted adolescents themselves as they consider the implications of this research.

LOOKING BACKWARDS AND DISCOVERING HOPE

CHAPTER 4

Introduction

My mother always told me, "You should learn from your past experiences." Looking back now, I think that she wanted me to realize that we often need to reflect backwards in order to discover the many lessons we have learned along the way. I have found that such reflections are often vantage points to understand what was significant to us, appreciate where we are, and learn what will keep us going. Written as an autoethnography, the following chapter portrays accounts of my experience as a school counsellor working with gifted students and the stories of the research participants. I view this work as autoethnographic, in that the stories of my six participants are laid alongside my own stories of hope and giftedness in high school education. The research documented in this chapter unfolds as a interweaving of stories including my current thoughts as a researcher, my past experiences and observations as a school counsellor, and my understandings of the participants' stories.

I begin by describing how the research process evolved and by introducing the participants. Throughout the remaining sections of the chapter, the voices of participants are interwoven with my own voice. With this multi-vocal text, I describe how academically gifted students experience hope in their educational experiences, and I share how I understand these stories and my own. Additionally, I share unique elements of stories of the participants and our experiences throughout the research process. I conclude the chapter by offering the participants' reflections on being part of this research process.

Conveying the Research Process

Flying eight hours back to New Brunswick from Alberta provided an opportunity to spend time reflecting on my years as a school counsellor. I started writing in my journal on the plane and documented moments and observations from my work with gifted students. It was easy to place myself back in my office at the large urban high school and allow those memories to return to my current day thoughts. What I noticed from this and subsequent moments of introspection was that my memories were connected to specific moments in my work, and that I held these memories as narratives of my former students and myself. I effortlessly recalled my encounters with academically gifted students when I thought about these students according to their graduating years. I even remembered how they walked across the stage at convocation. Once back home in New Brunswick, my journal remained near by me throughout the summer. When my mind would wander back to my past professional experiences with academically achieving gifted students, I quickly made notes and comments in my journal. As I immersed myself in the participant's interviews, my own reflections as a high school counsellor and even as a high school student became even more vivid.

Within days of being at home, I sent a few emails to my former academically achieving gifted students informing them of my research project and my desire to find participants. Like the keen and committed students they were in high school, they quickly set out to help me locate prospective participants. Wanting to maintain confidentiality and ethical research standards, my former students asked their peers, who appeared to meet my research study criteria, if they would be interested in becoming a participant and provided their peers with my contact information. My former students were instructed not to follow up with their peers concerning my study, and it is my

understanding that my former students still are uncertain who participated in my study and who did not.

After my initial contact with my former students, I checked my email regularly. Within hours, I received an email from a university student who was willing to be my first participant. As I was preparing to make the two hour drive to where he was studying, I received an email from another interested student. After completing the initial interviews with the first two participants, I asked them if they knew of other such students and asked them to provide prospective participants with my contact information. Within a period of two weeks, I had found six participants who were willing and able to be involved with my study. I even had other individuals offering to be participants, and so I created a "participant waiting list" for future research endeavours.

Throughout the summer months of 2005 in New Brunswick, I drove across the Province of New Brunswick interviewing my six participants at their preferred locations and documenting my reflections in my journal. On one particular morning, I actually drove to the large urban high school where I worked for three years. It is amazing how a place, a context, can trigger memories from the past. Although I couldn't get into my old office, I sat with my journal on the football field and allowed the past to become the present. It seemed important to revisit the ethnographic context for my study.

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My Reflections

Most nights when I left work for home and walked past the flag poles, I carried my students' anxiety home with me. It appeared to be so heavy that my students needed someone on the inside to help them carry their load. As a student, I never felt those pressures to perform at school or to compete with my peers to be the best and earn the

notable accolades. I always thought school should be about learning, not competing. Yet, when I started working as a school counsellor, especially at this large high school, I, too, became wedged in the "need to succeed, nothing but the best, I did better than you" mentality that exists in most high schools. As a professional, as much as I helped them to manage their anxiety, I am certain that I also contributed to their pressures to be successful. As a school counsellor, I repeatedly said, "You can get higher marks, just apply yourself, study more, and work harder." I am certain my intentions were positive. Yet in the beginning of my career, I was of the mentality that students should focus strictly on their marks, because they are ultimately, what matters most.

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I was fortunate to complete most of my in-depth interviews with the participants face to face, while the remaining interviews were completed over the phone. The face to face interviews were very intense, and the average interview lasted over ninety minutes. Some interviews lasted as long as two hours. The phone interviews tended to be less emotionally intense, and I sometimes found myself wishing I could meet with the students in person. I found myself wanting to observe their reflective process and engage more with their emotional response to my questions, just as I had when we met in person.

Once the interviews were completed, I began the task of transcribing the interviews. As I completed all transcriptions myself, I had the opportunity to revisit with each of the participants and to engage intensively with the material. Transcribing the interviews myself allowed me to become connected intimately with the participants' stories. Hearing the interviews at such a slow pace offered me the opportunity to hear their narratives very clearly. Throughout the transcribing process, I found myself making comments in the margins and writing in my own journal. Each participant had an

opportunity to review the transcriptions and to make any necessary changes. Many of the participants requested a copy of the final product and remained in contact with me throughout the research process.

Introducing the Participants: Describing their Early High School Years

I was fortunate to meet six highly articulate and engaged participants throughout the course of this research project. Individually and collectively, they have added a tremendous amount of depth and understanding to my study. They humbly offered a perspective that, until now, I believe has remained unspoken in the research literature. In order to understand their hope throughout high school, it is important to be introduced to the participants and to know how the interviews began. Most of the students started the interviews by discussing the high school system overall, the enrichment opportunities, and how they viewed their high school years.

In order to understand the ethnographic context for the my study, one should be aware that high school in New Brunswick begins in grade nine and continues to grade twelve. Throughout the first two years of high school, all students are placed in a standard program and are only given a chance to select a few optional courses for their grade ten year. From my experiences, I found academically gifted students to be frustrated and lost when they were restricted in their curriculum and course selection. Towards the end of grade ten, students are asked to make their course and level selections for their eleventh year. Students may select from level one, two, three, or open, or, if available, Advanced Placement courses or International Baccalaureate courses. Level one courses are geared towards independent students who have successfully completed their grade ten program (i.e. Physics 11-1, or Advanced Mathematics 12-1). Level two

courses are academic courses that provide a more structured teaching environment (i.e. English 11-2). Level three courses are general courses that offer a more structured teaching environment as well as a more practically based curriculum (i.e. Mathematics 11-3). Open courses are offered to any level student and typically cover material that is both theoretical and practical (i.e. Canadian History 12-0, Theatre Arts 12-0). Often, there is a smaller number of students who want to take the open courses, so consequently the courses are offered as open level courses. Towards the end of the grade eleven, students are asked to select their courses for their final year of high school. There are a series of mandatory courses in the final two years. Yet, in the larger New Brunswick high schools, students do have a large array of courses from which to choose.

After sharing the programmatic context of their gifted education, participants began to talk about who they were as individuals and what hope was to them throughout high school. It seemed as if they first wanted to set the stage, before describing their individual notions of hope and how hope was connected to their educational experience and who they were as an individual.

David

I am certain that his friends would think of him as a "bundle of energy" and an inquiring mind in search of answers. David excelled academically in high school, earned a number of scholarships, participated in math contests and national quiz shows, attended a national summer program for gifted youth, and was the captain of a varsity athletic team at his high school. Driven and ambitious are words that certainly capture his spirit.

After hearing my introduction to the research project, David promptly said, "of course I will participate, I have not thought about high school in years." He approached participating in our interviews very systematically and appeared to be genuinely recalling

his experiences knowing that it potentially could bring about change in the school systems. Towards the end of our first interview, he offered to contact a few other peers who could act as participants in my study.

David reflected on his high school experience with a sigh,

> *I spent three years in high school, grade ten, eleven, and twelve. The biggest recollection I have of the school was that it was huge; it was a full city class in each grade. Grade ten was a bunch of 'blurs,' the volume of people in the hallways between classes was just so very large. You had to share a locker with other people, and it was all just so standardized. I often don't recall grade ten when I think back to my high school years. In a sense, we were just putting in the time, as it was only one year.*

David further stated,

> *Enrichment opportunities in grade ten, ha, not that I remember! I remember grade ten as just that. There were not even suggestions from teachers like 'you are a smart kid why don't you do this or you have this ability.' It was more like just pushing us through. In grade ten, I just couldn't go as far as I wanted to go with the curriculum. Having done the level one courses in grade eleven and twelve and looking back, grade ten could have been a lot more. I would have welcomed that opportunity to learn things, do those extra modules to keep myself busy.*

Victoria

Victoria is someone that I could not describe as being shy, reserved, or non-competitive. She attended a large high school and completed grade twelve with the second highest grade point average in her graduating class. She was an active member of several of the school's committees and clubs, competed in math competitions, received a Certificate of Academic and Community Service Excellence, and was the captain of a varsity athletic team. Throughout our interviews, Victoria was witty and candidly shared many personal stories around hope and her high school experience.

Victoria is now in a graduate program in a Western Canadian university. She described her experience in grade nine and ten as frustrating, and mentioned she found it very difficult to get excited and hopeful about school when school life felt stagnant.

> *Those were horrible years. It is just so frustrating to just sit there and feel like you wanted a challenge. 'Push me, give me something!' In grade nine, I was allowed to do some advanced algebra on the computer on my own, but that is the only enrichment opportunity that I can think of. I was always finished my work ahead of everybody else, and I would pull out my work from other classes, and then get crapped on for not doing math, even though it was all done!*

Victoria continued to comment that,

> *The only enrichment program I had was when I was in grade five. They used to throw logic problems at us. That is it, and they would let us play chess. They would take us out of our classes for one period a week to do these exercises.*

Jay

Jay graduated from a relatively large high school in New Brunswick. Initially, it appeared as though Jay was very apprehensive about participating in our interviews. As trust was established, he shared incredibly personal stories about his hope in high school and his trepidations began to cease. He shed light onto very dark times in his life, and he offered a deeply personal view of his encounters in high school.

Jay modestly relayed that he graduated with high academic honours, received national level scholarships, and participated in a national summer program for gifted students. Yet to this day, I am certain he would tell you that he had "no clue" how he received such honours.

"I started high school in grade nine," Jay mentioned as he discussed the meaninglessness of the first two years of high school.

> *Grade nine was surrounded by intimidation. People in grade twelve looked so old and so very mature. Grade nine, was intimidating, scary, and*

> *unknown. Grade ten was a little bit more comforting, and you were starting to figure out who you were and what things were about. Looking back, I didn't feel a lot of pressure to satisfy my parents or to reach my own goals because my marks in those [early] classes really didn't count for anything.*

Peter

Peter shared similar sentiments, yet he handled finishing his class work early in slightly different ways.

> *Grade nine and ten, were completely different experiences than grade eleven and twelve. I almost think of them as two separate experiences. Grade nine and ten were just like really, really easy. There was not enough work, and we didn't do that much in class. Everyone was taking the same classes. We had gym class, bird class, English class. It was fun, but it wasn't that challenging. We were given letter grades and weird schemes where we were given a mark out of six or something stupid and meaningless. There was such a mixed bag of kids in every class, mixed bag of interest and of levels. I handled it by developing a few bad habits. I would finish all my work and then I would just act up. I got into a lot of trouble in grade nine and ten. I would horse around and that type of stuff, because we would work for a week on a poster or something and then it would be done in a day and we would just do nothing for the rest of the week. It was always like, 'Peter was talking in class, or Peter was chucking paper balls in class.' It was kind of a big joke. I wouldn't do anything extra because there wasn't really anything extra to do, and I wasn't really interested in the stuff we were learning. I was kicked out of class a bunch of times to go stand in the halls or whatever. I always felt the material was a joke. I knew what a line was, I knew what the equation of a line was, and I knew what a parabola was. I was always thinking standing in the hall, 'This doesn't make any sense because I am still going to take the test, and I will do really well on it.' I am sure I did well, but I certainly didn't have to work for it, and I didn't work as hard as I could have, and I wasn't motivated to work. When I look back on my high school experience now, I do not think about grade nine and ten so much because those were the sort of times that I was just sort of hanging out and I wasn't really doing very much.*

Although Peter achieved a high academic grade point average throughout school, earned a number of scholarships, participated in math competitions, served on the student council, and participated in athletics, he was likely not easy to have in class for his teachers. His keenly observant and pensive mind was apparent throughout our interviews, as well as his playful personality and kind soul. Having graduated from a

small high school in New Brunswick, he had many questions about other opportunities and experiences other New Brunswick graduates may have been offered.

Peter was noticed by his high school teachers, and he articulated how they shared the following with him one day.

> *We have a few students who are simply not being challenged here and they can actually take some grade eleven courses in their second semester of grade ten. After that recognition I sort of said, I am with the grade eleven students here, so I am going to have to work my butt off. That is when I really started to work hard and got interested in science, doing well, and working hard. That is probably really when the transition started for me as a student.*

Peter recalled his transition into grade eleven from grade ten and mentioned,

> *I matured a lot in a short time, and started hanging out with a different group of students who were really focused on going to university. I started doing really well, and my confidence began to build. Thinking about university and going to university probably didn't cross my mind and become a reality until I started being challenged in school because I lived with my mom and we didn't have a lot of money, and I would've had to take out a pretty big loan to go. When I started getting good grades and the teachers were like, 'Peter, you should start applying for these schools and these scholarships.' It gave me a lot of hope. On marks alone, I got an entrance scholarship to study at a good university.*

Marie

Marie graduated from a large high school in New Brunswick with top marks. She had grown up in a small rural community. She attended a small rural school from kindergarten until grade nine and began our interviews talking about her transition into high school.

> *It was a huge transition into grade ten, but having a standard year to decide what I actually liked and disliked was beneficial. I needed a basic overview of everything before I could focus and try to play to my strengths.*

Marie indicated that, "*There were no other forms of gifted programs or other enrichment type activities offered,*" suggesting that she wished for other enrichment type opportunities. She further suggested that in order to smooth out the transition into grade eleven, she would have liked a mentorship program with an older student.

> *I had a lot of questions like, is it worth it to take level one courses if my marks won't be as high? Having someone who has gone through it say, 'Yes, I went through it and my marks were not as high, but it made my first year of university that much better.' I would have really liked to have heard that from somebody who had been through it because that is exactly what I would tell somebody right now, your marks may not be as good, but it helps you that first year of university.*

Throughout her high school years, she was captain of a varsity level athletic team at her school, participated in several extra-curricular activities, attended a national summer program for gifted youths, and mentioned that she had a number of close girlfriends.

John

John has great desires to share his views with the world. John is an intensely passionate person. His ideas were both practical and philosophical in nature. He unassumingly discussed his years in high school and spoke highly of teachers who went out of their way to provide enriching opportunities. Throughout high school, he excelled academically, and I am certain he unintentionally, intellectually challenged a number of seasoned professionals.

John transferred from a small high school to a large high school in order to have access to a wide array of courses. He began his research interviews with me by describing his rationale for the transition, from one high school to another, and the hope that he found in the new school,

So, in my old school 95% of my classes were chosen for me. I wanted to have diversity in the courses that I could select. The small school and the lack of options was starting to be an issue, and that is why I left. I felt the environment was too small and it wasn't conducive to where I wanted to go. It felt like it had reached its limits. I found, at the new school, an incredible diverse array of courses that I hadn't had access to before. So, I experimented a little bit and started doing different things.

John continued,

In high school, sometimes you have to do the same thing again and again. Like everybody else you have to do chemistry, physics, biology, math, and you just follow your slots and you just follow the classes as they are presented, and it is so passive. If I could sum it up in one word, it is just so very passive. The students who did really well were often not the students who were the most intelligent, in my opinion, but they were the ones who had the dedication, and they were dedicated and had a good work ethic. I know a lot of students who didn't have that systematic type of mind to keep track of everything they had to do and write everything on time. They didn't have that, but they are brilliant. One day, they will be novelists or doing something they love and doing it exceptionally well, but they just didn't fit into the routine of high school.

My Reflections

The participants introduced themselves as students. They often described their early high school experiences as being frustrating, directionless, and standardized. They described themselves as being in an environment where they were lost, craving options and opportunities, and searching for themselves. Whether they were bored, actively seeking opportunities, or misbehaving, they told me that much of their early high school experiences fostered passivity and did little to inspire hopes and dreams. Their early high school years (grades 9 and 10) appeared to lack meaning; and, consequently, I discovered they were not motivated to learn but rather to just get through.

From my experience as a school counsellor, I noted that academically gifted students with whom I worked were often both eager and hesitant to become decisive characters in their educational careers as they moved into grades eleven and twelve.

Some students found hope within the newly found freedom to choose their courses and to be released from the standardized programs of grade ten, while other students felt overwhelmed by the level and course options. Certain students felt anxious about getting into those courses that they needed for whatever certificate or entrance requirements to universities and colleges. To me, such students appeared uncertain about the future and whether or not they could handle the path ahead.

Descriptions of Hope

Although I did not initially realize it, while the participants were introducing themselves through their stories of high school, they were also introducing me to their experiences of hope. Later in the interview process, they became more specific or more explicit about how they defined hope and their sources of hope. Yet, looking back on their stories, I notice it was implicitly there from the beginning, and it was evident in how they described their early high school years.

David

David described hope as,

> *Hope is the confidence that you are going to be able to do what you want to do. You know, I came from a good family. My parents both have good jobs and I do not think there was any kind of feeling that I have to transcend them. I think things were very different for my parents. Things are much more straightforward for me because I come from two good parents with a good history. There is nothing to climb out and above, or a barrier to break. It is a bunch of logical steps and it comes back to what I have always wanted to do. I have always wanted to be a doctor, and I have always been in a position to make all the steps that I have wanted to. Hope is knowing that those goals are realizable through an avenue. It is a matter of being able to do all those things, or to feel that I am in a position to be able to do all those things.*

David shared that his hope came from his parents, but that it also was

> *more intrinsically motivated. It came from within, rather than from my friends. I knew that I could accomplish what I wanted, if I put my mind to it,*

and that gave me hope. Previous successes in life led me to believe that I could do more if I tried. Most of the teachers were very good, especially the ones that were the level one teachers who recognize potentials in students. They would talk to you about what you wanted to do, very individually most of the time. You know they would ask, 'David, what is going on with you?'

Victoria

Victoria articulated how she describes her hope metaphorically as her engine.

I call my hope, my drive because you know you are chugging along, chugging along, and all of a sudden there is a big red light in front of you and you have to stop. It really takes time to get your drive back up to pace, to get back up to that speed you were at, and to keep going faster, and to push yourself to go even harder. It is confidence, support, and will that you have to go and grind it out.

Victoria shared how her sources of hope were,

Mom, Dad, and my brother. It didn't matter what I was I doing, we would come home and it was, 'How was your day?' and we would just start. They would be like, 'Did you get any tests or projects back today? Well, how did you do?' They would come right beside me, and be joking around. They knew what was going on, but coming home to that was very special. Also teachers, not anyone in particular, there is just something about the way a teacher you have had for one of your classes, when they look at you and give you that smile that nod, it feels great. Not necessarily the fantastic or the excellent written across your page, just that recognition and acknowledgement.

Jay

Jay indicated that hope is also like a force of energy,

For me it is that energy. Hope and energy go hand in hand. Hope is just a kind of that feeling you get when you are in a really tough situation, when you think there is no hope. It is just something that you can't describe, but you know when it is there. I have a quote from a book that describes hope, 'You can't see or smell or hear or touch or taste them, but you know that they are there, like a current running through the air.' No one really talks about hope, but we all want it. It is also being able to accomplish what I want to do, not like dreams per se, but being able to accomplish what I want to do and strive to be able to do. Hope to be able to graduate from university, get a great job, and be happy in my life. It is sometimes that strength and integrity, and that voice in your mind saying you have to do this, you really want this.

Jay reported how he found hope,

Just seeing people around me succeed, especially people that I am close with succeed gave me hope. I got a lot of that inner strength from my family and friends. I confided in my mother a number of times, and shared with her things like, 'I do not know if I can do this?' She would always just say, 'Well, try your best and you can do it, and just keep moving forward.' I certainly owe a lot to my parents. They helped me get through a lot.

Jay said that teachers' belief in him gave him more hope,

It certainly gave me more confidence when I felt that my teachers noticed me. I am not someone who is outspoken, so when my teacher recognized me or said, 'You are capable of good work,' it really boosted my confidence. You know, it gives you that sense that I can do this and things are not as bad as they seem. I know a couple of times, I would do very poorly on this assignment or something, and my teacher would say, 'Do not worry; you are capable of much better.' So, it kind of gave you hope and energy for the next time to keep going towards, well, the next time.

Jay further discussed how his ultimate hope in high school as being,

Graduation, the pinnacle, or the goal to get through, I guess for me was hope. I guess through the tough times, even thinking that something inside of you would say, 'You have to keep going, this is not the end of the world.' I do not know, sometimes I always pictured a way, whenever I had an exam coming and it is like eight o'clock at night. I would say, 'In twenty four hours you will be done. In twenty-four hours you will be sitting in this exact same spot doing nothing.'

Peter

Peter voiced how "*Hope would be there is light at the end of the tunnel.*" He explained hope in more detail by saying,

You know, you have something to look forward to, and you have got an idea in your mind that it can be done, and it is possible. I know I have hope when I have a desire to change the way I am acting in life.

Peter further described his hope as,

The idea of confidence, I guess it is the idea that you can do what you want to do, or you can do something that you are aspiring to. If you look at people who don't have hope, they feel that they are limited in some sort of way. There is something preventing them from achieving what they want to achieve or do what they want to do. I guess for individuals who have hope,

they don't see those sort of limitations in their own abilities or those th[redacted] that are preventing them, the obstacles. Believing you have the ability to do what you want to do, that is hope.

Peter shared a story about how he found hope in an early elementary school moment,

I will never ever forget, this isn't from high school, but, I will never ever forget this moment in my life, and I think about it often when I look back at my life. When I was in grade one or two, the teacher would put up words on the board, big lists of words like one hundred words. She would get a kid to go up there to the front of the board and read them all. They would read these lists of words, and you would raise your hand to volunteer to go. I remember raising my hand for so long in every class, and not getting called. Yet, when another kid would go up there, I would read the words as they would read them and try to beat them. One day, I finally got called up and the teacher said, 'Read these words' or whatever. I was just running, reading them as fast as I could. When I got to the end, I was really articulate about them. Then, at the end, she said, 'Peter can you come here for a moment.' She said, 'You guys should all aspire to be like Peter'. She asked me, 'How did you read the list so fast, you must be reading at home?' I remember sitting down and thinking, 'Geez, I like that feeling.' When I think back, that might not have been the reason I tried so hard throughout my twelve years, but...I think back to these little points of encouragement where I was really given hope to really do something big, not just the average but to really go for it. So, I guess it was moments like that, that really gave me hope. I guess when I am given encouragement, those are the sorts of things that give me hope. I guess when I am given, I could say confidence, but when you are given things like self-esteem, praise, or accolades, those are the sorts of things that wow, make you say, 'I am doing this.'

Peter further mentioned how,

For me, it was also the support of everybody in my life telling me that I could do this. Maybe it was a few key teachers who really took me aside and singled me out and said, 'Look, you can do something.' That is what gave me hope. So, like if someone is telling me that I can do something. Well, that gives me hope. If I can hear right from the source, 'Look Peter, I know you can do this, it means more. Hope is instilled from the support of a variety of different people in all areas in my life. Hope, for me, came from encouragement. Also doing well, doing well on tests, getting my marks back and a teacher saying you had the highest mark. Getting called down to the office and being told that they would like me to write this math competition and represent the school, and friends saying why don't you run for vice-president, these things were all hope building, and the common link is people putting confidence and trust in me. That gave me hope, like finding little

steps along the way that gave me evidence that I am capable of doing really good things. It was really hope building as well. That acknowledgement would be the biggest thing that gave me hope in school. My mom said that I should go to university and that I should start applying for these scholarships. That encouragement and good support system at home and with friends was uplifting as far as hope. To be hopeful you need that positive encouragement and that positive environment. That did it for me.

Marie

Marie indicated her hope as,

Hope is a lot about confidence. Believing that I can do things that I want to do, believing that I can get through this week when I have so many mid-terms or whatever. When I believe I can do it, I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. I know that I am going to be okay and get everything that I want, that is hope.

Marie stated,

I had an amazing support system in my parents. I remember so many nights, my mother coming in, bringing me a cup of tea, and telling me that it was going to be okay. That was a huge thing, my parents were very supportive and my parents kind of knew that everything was going to be fine, and kind of knew that I was going to do well. I think they had to convince me of that fact. It really made a difference for me, my parents were a huge factor and my friends too. My friends went through the same sort of thing and said, 'You can do this, you are smart.' It wasn't necessarily anything that I did, to bring my focus back. It was that I had people around me to help me with that. Teachers in school were approachable and that type of thing, but in high school the classes were big. So, I didn't get to know my teachers well enough to feel it when they patted me on the back and said, 'You can do this, you are going to be fine.'

Marie found hockey to be a source of hope,

I do not know if hockey was a source of hope or stress relief, but it lead to confidence, which lead to hope. For me, hockey was a big thing. Hockey was a huge commitment, and a lot of time, but I was aggressive when I was on the ice. That was how I released energy and tension. Everything that was going on in my life, I left it in the dressing room, went out on the ice, and played my heart out for sixty minutes. That time on the ice was something else that would help me to focus. Afterwards, my mind would be clear, and I could kind of restart from where I left off.

John

John mentioned,

> *There are a number of ways to define hope. I mean, I think you do need a sense of confidence in yourself, believing in yourself. There is nothing more, you know when students don't believe in their own potential, like if they have not been encouraged or told they are good at something, they won't have any hope to do well or to even try. They need self-confidence, and success – getting small success along the way. To have a real sense of hope, you need to have succeeded before at little things, so that you can hope for big things. You know you need to have little successes, to dream big ones. I think without any little successes, you will not have tasted success and you will not know how to strive for it. I think hope is essential to that, to be able to think big about your life. Instead of just being like, 'Oh, I have always been behind. Oh, I am dumb.'*

John continued,

> *I see in hope a belief in oneself, and a belief in the world. Like you have to have faith in the world to have hope, and I think about that on a number of different levels. Not only in yourself, but also that the world is a beautiful place and there is potential for incredibly things to happen in it, in order to have hope within it.*

My Reflections

Hope for these academically achieving gifted students appeared to be defined as a combination of a sense of confidence in their own abilities, a dynamic sense of direction, a level of certainty in themselves, and a belief that you have the capacity to live out your dreams. Hope appeared to be an energy and a life force that propels them onwards through life regardless of what shall be placed in their way. As the interviews continued, I noticed how for each of the participants, hope seemed to be connected to the future, rather then being something witnessed in the immediacy of the moment. I realized how hope was integral to how these former students saw themselves and to how they evaluated themselves as "being alright" and "being something" in the world. Further, I

noticed how their hope appeared to be fed by the memories and evidence that good things had happened in the past.

My participants suggested that hope comes from parents, teachers, and peers. Hope, in this sense, appeared to be based in relationships and in the sense of a connection. Hope seemed to stem from earning recognition (certificates, high grades, etc.) from others, achieving accolades from others, and knowing that others believed in them. It seemed to develop when they acquired confidence from their environment (teachers, parents, each other), created goals for the future, and believed in themselves and a world that could support their dreams. Each of their methods for creating hope was very action oriented, connected to deep rooted desires to "be something" in the world, and served to help them create a meaningful existence. There always appeared to be the next step or next path waiting for each of these students. In this sense, there appeared to be no end to hopes but rather a momentum that builds from acknowledgement, recognition, accolades, successes, and purpose.

These ideas make sense to me now as a researcher, teacher, and counsellor. I remember observing academically gifted students come alive when they could accomplish a task, when they were recognized for their accomplishments, when they had a place to belong free of conditions or a place to truly be themselves, and when they had a sense of purpose for their learning. Yet, I also recall noticing how many of them would struggle to balance the pressures created from their own success. From my own work with students, I observed that success tends to breed more success and creates more pressure to perform at high levels.

Hope in the High School Context

In order to further understand the experience of hope for these students, common elements about the high school experience for my participants, who were academically achieving students, were identified. Written as a multi-vocal text, which includes my narratives from my past experiences as a school counsellor, interview transcriptions from the participants, and my notes from my research journal, the following section outlines my understanding of common themes across these texts. The common themes explore how academically gifted students remember hope and how their hope was impacted by their educational experiences. Each theme begins with a narrative from my research journal that describes my past professional years at a large urban high school in New Brunswick and my encounters with academically achieving gifted students. The stories are followed by the participants' narratives, which are shared as quotes from our interviews. These narratives are then followed by my thoughts and interpretations as a researcher concerning each theme.

Creating Hope with Opportunities for Growth and Challenge (Level One Classes, Enriched Classes, Independent Studies)

A Story from my Research Journal

Thank goodness, the schools were opened for teachers and counsellors prior to the first day of class. Returning from summer holidays, returning to a regular schedule, and wearing regular shoes for the first time in two months felt like a jolt at the best of times, let alone when you have just transferred to a new school. I remember well my first day as a counsellor at the large high school.

"Ms. Thompson, your mailbox is overflowing with information from colleges, universities, and there are a bunch of scholarship forms that need to be addressed," mentioned the school secretary as I walked into the main office for only the second time.

"And, where is my mailbox?" I wondered and set out to find my way.

"Oh, and there are a few new grade eleven students who want to speak with you concerning their courses. They said something about not being able to get the courses that they 'REALLY' need in order to get some certificate," the secretary called as I walked down the hallway towards my office.

"Right," I responded with the confidence of a young racehorse. Not really understanding the certificate program or the way the school managed their scheduling system, I was a bit lost in the information I gathered from the secretary. Yet, I carried on down the hallway.

I got to my office on that first unofficial day and amongst the boxes and universities calendars was greeted by three grade eleven students. They appeared stressed and frustrated but eager for the challenge of the new courses.

"Nice to meet you, welcome back", I said, with what I am sure was confusion in my voice.

"Hi, we are all really concerned because we don't know if we need Biology 11 for science programs at university."

My own trepidation grew because I didn't know their answers either, "Well, let's read the calendar together and see what we can find out."

"Because, if I don't have to take it then I am going to take another course that is more interesting and more geared towards what I actually want to study. I want it to balance out my second semester, and hopefully boost my grade point average, and I just

don't want to review things over and over again, I actually want to learn things this year," one student trumpeted up from behind the over flowing recycling bin filled with the past year's university calendars.

"Is it really worth it to take the level one courses in grade eleven or is it better to take the level two courses", the third student inquired. "I really want to enjoy my year."

"Well, let's discuss it together." I shared hoping to relieve a bit of the tension and to find the university calendars that, by this point, I desperately needed.

Thank heavens, I found the calendars that I needed and could interpret the entrance requirements for each of the students. I could see their anxiety float away as we discussed what courses they needed to have on their transcripts in order to gain admission into the various universities. I learned that they were relieved and hopeful when someone went through the process of reading the requirements. It was if they were no longer alone in the education process and there was a way through the system. Such a relationship and a connection appeared to offer a sense of hope.

"Okay, so we know what courses you need in order to be considered for admission, and luckily we can accommodate those particular courses within each of your timetables," I stated with confidence. Yet, hearing their concern, I began to inquire about their fears and questions concerning the different levels. "You were also wondering about the benefits and downfalls of the level one courses?"

"Yeah", one student started, "How are they different?"

"Will my marks suffer?"

"Are they worth taking? Can I handle them or will they overpower me?"

"I don't want to look stupid!" They all responded.

"Well," I mentioned, "Let's see."

Victoria

Victoria indicated that the level one classes (enriched academic curriculum level) enhanced her hope as they, *"made learning better, and you didn't have to wait for everyone to catch up because everyone else was more or less at the same level."* Victoria elaborates on how her hope was enhanced by taking level one classes. She uses the metaphor of team play to illustrate her thoughts.

> *Despite the fact there is a hierarchy in there, everyone is more or less on the same level and everyone can handle the same amount, and there is nobody struggling behind. We could learn more, and they (the teachers) set the bar high and we jumped over it. Yet, in the other classes (Level two, three, or open) people were sitting on the bench, not playing, and they had no desire to play. Seeing other people in those other classes just sitting on the bench and not playing, makes you not want to play. If everyone else is jumping the bar, even if you hit it once, you are getting over the next time because someone will give you a pole and let you hop it. People would help you out in the level one classes. When you are in those lower classes, you are helping out everyone around you, and it is you helping a bunch of people and you are held back. It was nice to see people around you doing well. In those level one classes, you communicate in the language of the subject and that is it, and you really want to learn. When you are in those other classes where nobody cares, the subject of discussion is never the subject. I hated those classes, and I hated being there. They were draining. They would drain all my energy. You are in a higher gear when you are in those other classes [level one]. Teachers could say it once in those classes, and that is enough for us. You say something and it is in there, data stored. Everybody else appeared to hold onto things until a test and then it is like data dump. Gone, it is useless and that is how they saw it. Where for us, we would hold onto it and not only hold onto it and use it, but hold it as sacred.*

Jay

"Grade eleven was stressful, I remember being overwhelmed," Jay recalled concerning his experience in his first semester in grade eleven, and he added how there was a particular culture in the academic classes in high school.

> *There is a culture in those level one courses, and if people were observing those classrooms they would see a lot more forwardness from the students to learn. Definitely, students wanted to be there, they wanted to learn, and they knew this was another stepping stone towards that goal they are reaching,*

such as higher education or graduating. There is hope in those classrooms because everyone is trying to get through those classes as an individual and as a group.

He remembered feeling hesitant in grade ten about taking the top level courses and shared how he was uncertain about his future as a student.

I didn't know if I could do it because it was so unknown, when I was in grade ten the students who were in the level one classes were like, 'really, really smart'. So, I didn't know if I could be up there, until I started experiencing the difference. There were no discipline problems, and it was fast paced, and we didn't have to wait for the other students. It was more like here is your work, let's move through it once and then let's move onwards.

John

John began his reflections by describing the polarized high school context. In particular, he commented how different the level one classrooms were compared to the level two or three classes. Overall, he found that the higher level academic classes were much less disruptive and more on task compared to the general level classes.

There are a couple of things that come up straight away concerning the level one classes. They were less disruptive. There was less lost time and more to the task at hand. When teachers gave an assignment, students would generally be quiet and do them. I took a few level two courses, and I took a trade as well. I did welding. In a class like welding, there really was disruption. So comparing the two extremes, you could not get more polarized. I mean some students would tell the teacher off in the welding class, and the whole class was much less organized and much less focused on what was taking place. Yet, in level one classes you wouldn't get any class disruption, everyone was there very much to learn, they would ask questions a lot more during the lecture, and asked a lot more questions that were direct and pointed. It was a lot more intense by nature, the level one classes were just more intensive.

John further described how he discovered a particular shallowness amongst the students in the higher level academic classes, and how he was happy being in between the different levels of classes.

I was happy being thought of as in between. To my friends, the ones that I hung out with, they knew I was in level one classes. I guess that is why I

could maintain friends from all three sides [level one, two, and three]. Now, I felt myself in a position where I could easily drift between all the levels and I could easily sit down with the level one students. Yet, even with them, I always felt as though there was a very curious shallowness about it all. I still to this day cannot put my finger on it, and I am not sure what it is but there is something about that. It is very plastic, it is all about marks, and it is like this façade they are putting up. I shouldn't generalize too much, but something bothers me about that, that sort of plasticity and sort of fakeness about it all at the competitive level one. You don't have that at the level two; level two, it is a very different experience. Everyone is more social and kind of jocular and this sort of that happy medium and everyone is sort of happier in the medium, to be honest. They don't stress like the ones in level one and they don't fret like the ones in level three. They are just kind of riding and going along. I really enjoyed it, I think there is something to learn. And, I personally learned a lot from individuals who were all in level three. They never did well academically, but now these students are working in mechanic shops and they are going to be some of the best mechanics around, the best that you are going to find.

Throughout his high school experience, John was offered an independent study by one of academic teachers. He commented how the independent learning experience significantly altered his hope in grade twelve.

Mr. Jackson really offered me an incredible opportunity that I don't know how to thank him for, in first term twelfth grade. I look back on this opportunity a lot. Having gone through a full year of grade eleven, I got into twelfth grade and I had to drop a class – Media Studies 120. It was a horrible experience. I went to Mr. Jackson and I said, 'I had to drop a class.' He mentioned, 'Well did you ever look into the option of doing an Independent Study?' At the time, I had not even heard of it or anything like that. They don't talk about it, they don't offer it, and no one had done it in like ten years at my high school apparently. Mr. Jackson approached me and said, 'Have you ever considered that?' I said. 'Considered it? I didn't even know the option existed'.

So, he and I started in and we proposed it and had to get the paper work ready for an independent study. You know, that is exactly what certain students need. I look back and I am so thankful to Mr. Jackson for taking me up on this, and just having the option to do it. I had a full term course the last period of the day. I had the opportunity to just sit in the library and read and do my own research, and I went into talk to him every now and again. He was really busy, so we didn't have that many meetings one on one, but it was very much my own project and through that I ended up writing a forty page paper. Looking back, that experience was more informative than any other class. That proved to me really, it gave me the chance to step beyond the curriculum and beyond all that stuff to do actual research on stuff that I

was interested in and that I wanted, that I was fascinated by, and wanted to do. Mr. Jackson believed in the students that had potential, and that made a lot of the difference. He suggested that I could probably even publish it. I mean, I put so many hours of research into this paper it was incredible. I did it partly because I was fascinated by the topic, but looking backwards, I have not completed a project that size since. It gave me the chance to really go "arms open" into the subject. I think that independence gave me such hope. Having that independence, and having someone have confidence in you, is huge. I can't emphasize that enough, having someone encourage you and believe in you. I look back and say, 'Wow'. Just to have that freedom to take on something that size on my own within the context of a high school where you have curriculum and people breathing down your neck the whole way through. It was like, that class was like my oasis. It gave me that breathing space to really sit down and do my own work.

In addition to his experience with his independent studies teacher, John discussed his experience with another teacher who offered independence throughout high school.

There is this other great teacher who was excellent and it came out in everything that he did. He taught mostly, the level one English classes, 121 English, 121 Drama. Mr. Clark everyone flocked to him because he was just wasn't your average teacher. Every term he made everyone hand in this semester long independent project. You had an independent project, and he said his two conditions were: it cannot be potentially lethal or it can not be racial. So, some people presented a piece of music and some people did painting. Anything you did was always complemented with a write-up. Anything you did you had to keep weekly journals and the progress that you made and how you were feeling. He really encouraged you to speak your emotions, be sensitive and be authentic. He encouraged students to be themselves and to channel themselves and their own creative energy through this project. I think students, myself included, thrived on that experience.

John further commented on the exploratory piece that is necessary for fostering hope throughout high school.

We need that exploratory piece; that is exactly it. I mean the passive structure of education right now, the metaphor that Bertrand Russell uses like pouring into a receptacle. You know traditionally that has been the whole idea of education. You take a bunch of knowledge, as we understand it today, you know historical knowledge, scientific knowledge, what have you. You pour it into a container that will then hold it and be able to give it back to you when the time comes. There is something, so fundamentally wrong with that, I am not sure I know where to begin. Throughout school, when I wasn't interested, I would just do my own readings in class. I often had teachers that wouldn't have any of it, so I encountered some problems

> *along the way with that. But, if I wasn't interested in what was being presented, I didn't hesitate for a minute to pull out a book. For me, I was making fuller use of my time. So, if I were going to be in a classroom where it is relatively quiet and it is well lit and you can read, why not? This is my education, I am the one who is going to fail your test, if you think I am going to fail your test from not listening in class, it is up to me. Not that every student should do or say that, because I do not think that every student would or could. I do not know, I have always been very independent minded in that way and I think that really played a huge role in my not hitting a wall and feeling exasperated with the system.*

Peter

Peter attended a smaller New Brunswick high school and his school couldn't offer specific level classes. In order to accommodate the needs and desires of a few of the gifted academically achieving students, they were permitted to take an advanced on-line distance education course. He described how he felt honoured to be selected and given permission to take the advanced level course, and he described how the process of taking his learning seriously gave him a sense of direction and hope.

> *There were five of us in a room with no supervision and we would just have an hour to do our on-line tutorials and that type of stuff, but it was kind of like an elitist program. If you started acting foolish or started talking about silly things, people would just look at you in a weird way. I can talk, 'nerd talk', but, in those classes if you were to bring up the fact that you were going to the dance or buy a new CD, it was out of the question and certainly could not have been discussed. It was like 'no' we are not talking about that at this moment. The transition from grade 10 into grade 11 was tough at first, for a month or two. Once I became settled in and got into a routine and formulated a group of friends, it was fine. It was a transition, to go from a guy who didn't really have to work all that much to a student who cared about his marks.*

Marie

Marie described how the environment of the level one classes taught her how to think and to learn. When her learning was taken seriously and she was engaged in the process, hope was fostered.

There is a big focus on application in the level one courses instead of doing cookie cutter questions over and over again. It was like, here is the theory and on a test you are going to have to apply the theory to what you do. There are more discussions, it isn't just straight lecturing, and there is a lot more application of knowledge and it isn't just about facts of whatever. Behaviour problems really didn't exist. The difference is amazing between the level one courses and the open level courses. The people just didn't necessarily care if they didn't hand in a paper on time, or they couldn't get their assignments done because they were partying or whatever. I remember even now the difference between classes. Mostly, I remember how nobody cared in the level two classes. Students were just there because they had to be, for the most part. In the level one classes, we had to do it, but we also enjoyed doing it. There was a passion involved in the process. I felt very little of that in the level two classes. The in class questions from students focused more on - what is going to be on the test and what do we have to know? Yet, in the level one classes the people would ask question like, 'well, what would happen if ...?' The level one courses were good practice because when you get to university your teacher doesn't prepare you as much, and they don't care if you don't have time to write things down.

David

David discussed the importance of marks throughout high school and his desires to get into the level one courses in high school.

High school was all about grade eleven and twelve because those were the marks that got me into university and were the ones on my transcript that I actually cared about because I could pick my own courses. That is when I took level one courses and Advanced Placement courses, and I really molded with all my friends. That was high school to me, that is what I remember. I moved away from the French Immersion courses, and decided that I wanted to pursue something. I decided at that point that I was going to be a doctor. I can remember at the end of grade ten, when I wanted into some of the grade eleven courses that I had to apply for them all separately. I had to have a teacher recommend me, in order to get into the courses. I remember picking up the sheet and knowing at that point, that I shouldn't have too much trouble getting into the level one courses. I looked very much forward to them as maybe being a little bit more of a challenge and actually learning some things.

My Reflections

Listening to the descriptions of the environments that provided growth and challenge for the participants in schools throughout New Brunswick, it is apparent to me

that what gave these students hope was the awareness that their learning and their abilities were taken seriously, and the fact that they could be actively involved in the process of planning their learning. Being given the opportunity to foster their passion for learning seemed to serve as an empowering, intense, and energizing experience that allowed the participants to recognize that knowledge could be revered and celebrated. Furthermore, I realized that when these students were taken seriously academically, especially by a teacher, hope was fostered.

In reviewing my narrative at the beginning of this section describing the discussions around level one and level two courses, what seemed to matter in those moments, in addition to the relationships that were being formed, was the fact that I took them seriously and demonstrated that I valued their learning and their decisions. There appeared to be hope in their learning, as it helped to move them onwards towards their aspirations in life and gave them a sense of being connected to what is out in the world to be discovered. It also appeared to serve as an opportunity to connect with themselves and to learn about how immersing themselves in their academic interests could feed their passions and hopes for life. Immersing themselves in challenging academic work also appeared to teach the participants about themselves and their abilities, abilities that fueled their hopes for the future.

Hopes to Belong and to be Connected Throughout High School

A Story from my Research Journal

After surviving the first few weeks of course changes and timetabling woes, I finally started to settle into the routine of being a high school counsellor. As a whole, the students were gradually becoming familiar with me and were getting to know me as a person. Solid counselling relationships were starting to form with the students with

whom I had begun personal counselling. I felt as though I was doing quite well. After all, I had found my way around, and I was able to manage student referrals and keep my mailbox empty. I was slowly starting to shift from "panic hurry up and do it mode" to a mode that had purpose and a role that had meaning. It was also in these early months, that I started noticing trends and concerning tendencies in certain academically achieving gifted students.

"Do you have a moment?" A rather quiet, uncertain voice opened the lines of communication from my office door way. It was 3:30 in the afternoon. I was just settling in to write my case notes before heading home for the day, when Samantha slowly eased her way into my office chair.

"Yeah, sure," was my welcoming, standard answer to students who came to see me on their own time after class, "of course, what has brought you in today?"

"I'm not really certain what I want to do with my life, and I am not really sure if I have taken the right classes?" She responded with hesitation. These sounded like huge questions, but I didn't want to assume or rush her own story.

We discussed her current grade eleven program and her past educational experiences. I examined her transcript on my computer, and soon she began to tell the story she really wanted to share.

"I don't really feel like I belong in school. I feel different from my classmates, and I am treated differently by teachers and by my peers. I never feel like I can be myself in class, or outside of class. I am always thinking about what I am saying and watching how everyone else replies to my comments," her eyes swelled as she told me of her experience.

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Marie

As Marie reflected on her early high school experiences, she recalled her feelings about not being able to be herself within her classes.

> *I always felt like I had to hold back in classes. I couldn't be myself and respond to the questions to which I knew the answers. I was hesitant to share a lot of my knowledge.*

David

David described how in a gifted program in middle school, he learned a message about belonging to a group that he still makes use of in his university classes today.

> *I was involved in this trivia contest in school, I liked trivia and that type of stuff. I was young, but I remember blowing the other grade seven, eight, and nine kids away with my answers. It was then, that I realized there is a point where you should hold back and let everyone else have a turn.*

John

John described with a great deal of frustration how he was treated differently throughout school by his teachers.

> *I was kind of encouraged to do extra work. Mostly, in math and research like I did extra projects. I was always expected to do more somehow, which is sort of interesting to look back on, because I never really thought of it. I was like, 'Okay, I am happy doing more,' but now that I look back, more always seemed to be expected. I mean teachers wouldn't give me the marks they would give my friends unless I had performed outstandingly well. So, I was expected to do more. I didn't really mind it, but I noticed that I was being graded harder than my friends, which in hindsight when I look back, I am actually thankful for and I think it was a good thing.*
>
> *Once this kind of really bothered me, I was reading silently in class. The teacher asked me out loud, 'So, what are you reading over there?' I was like, 'What?' I didn't even know he was talking to me. I had the book under my desk. I was just like, 'Ah'. He said, 'Come on, don't be shy. Hold it up.' So, I held up the book. It was one my friend had given me, and the whole class looked at me. It was 'How the Mind Works' by Steven Pinker. So, I kind of held it up. He was like 'How the Mind Works,' and he kind of made a joke of it. Well, he eventually didn't put up with my reading anymore. He started sending me to the office when I was reading. So, I got sent to the office three times, and he almost forced me to drop his class. He sent me to the office a number of times over this, and I even talked to Mr. Jackson. He*

> *said, 'If he is going to kick you out of that class, you probably want to stop reading in your desk.' And, I was just like, 'Yeah, but when he is talking about stuff that I know in and out, I don't even need to be in his class.'*

Victoria

Victoria emotionally described how school was easy compared to dealing with peers. She resented being referred to as the "smart kid" and commented how fitting in everywhere doesn't mean you belong somewhere in particular.

> *It was never about school because the school part was easy, it was always about the people. I never really fit in with any crowd. It was like I didn't belong with any particular group. So, I was a little bit of everybody and I still am to this particular day. It did not matter what crowd I hung out with, I was always, 'the smart Kid!' It is not a label I was comfortable with at school and it really challenged my hope. When you are hanging out with the soccer team and you are not the all star, you are the smart kid! It is tough. Despite the fact, that I was team captain and I was the all star, but I was still labeled the smart kid. I mean I could hang out with those girls, but a week later it would be someone else and for whatever reason, I was always the smart kid. Maybe it was because I didn't hold back, especially in high school because I didn't learn my modesty until I got to university and in high school it was always about rubbing it in somebody else's face. It is like I didn't belong anywhere. I fit in with different crowds and I fit in almost everywhere, but fitting in almost everywhere isn't the same as having that core, that place where you belong.*

Peter

Peter described how at times throughout high school, he struggled to find anyone else who was similar to him in school.

> *I guess you could say there were times when I felt like I didn't fit in. There were certainly times when I felt like none of my friends really liked me a lot. I haven't found anybody who is really like me. You hang out with the old buddies from grade ten and you goof off a bit, then you are on the student council and it is all preppy and stuff. There are all these social divides and you always have to be mindful of whom you are around.*

My Reflections

It appeared that multiple dimensions of hope were at play in the accounts of academically achieving participants. I discovered that while taking the learning

experience seriously helped foster hope in the academically achieving students, feeling different and not feeling like they belonged anywhere, seemed to challenge students' sense of hope in relationships. A key aspect of hope appeared to be connected to relationship, and throughout high school, this sense of true connection was difficult to find. Being afraid to be themselves, holding back their own abilities, and fearing being labeled as different sometimes prevented these participants from being themselves and often left them feeling alone. Without a confident sense of who they were embedded within accepting relationships with peers, I realized that their hopes, in their own sense of identity, seemed to be challenged. Hope seemed to be focused not so much on the act of "doing" academic achievement, ~~but~~ rather on the hope "to be" themselves and to discover just what that might mean to each of them individually.

Understanding Personal Hope Amidst the Competitiveness between Students

A Story from My Research Journal

"That is it!" An argumentative male voice shouted from the hallway.

"Slam…," went a door.

"I just can't take it anymore," he loudly mumbled to himself as he walked briskly by the guidance department doorway. My colleague and I paused from our conversation when we heard the Advanced Calculus classroom door slam. Thrown from my mind set, my eyes and ears were attempting to follow the unfolding events outside my office door. I knew I was a few steps and certainly a few conversations behind the pace. Third period had just started and students would have just settled into the routine. What had happened? Wanting to chase after the male student, but knowing he needed time, I tried to refocus and finish the conversation with my colleague.

"Right, um the workshop, I will do the first two sessions. Would you do the third?"

.....

Victoria

Victoria easily recalls the days tests were handed back and how her hope was shattered.

> *Getting that 99%, when someone else had gotten 100% feels like one word, 'Boo-Yah'. Picture a student standing up and looking at you, looking at your test, looking at his test, and pointing at you and saying, 'Boo-Yah'. It feels like a slap in the face. It is like, I had just done really well on this test and now it looks like nothing.*

She further noted how,

> *At that time, the mark was everything. It would stay with you for the whole day. If that was first class, chemistry in the morning, it was with you until fifth period when you have to go to physics, until you go home, until the next test when you have to beat him.*

Jay

Jay mentioned how there was a competitive mentality in the classrooms that caused the students to be stressed both before exams and afterward.

> *Before a test everyone would be really stressed and then afterwards when the teachers would come around with the marks everyone would be like holding their breath and as soon as the marks came out everyone would be like, 'What did you get, what did you get?' They were like, 'I got this mark, like a ninety.' Another student would say, 'I got a hundred.' So, I guess it was like a stepping ladder where one person would say their mark, and then someone else would try to top that. It would just keep escalating. Sometimes, I felt like I didn't belong per se because there was a large majority of the class who were advanced, advanced who could always do a lot better than I could do. There was definitely this competitive way.*

Jay described how the students teased each other often, and how the teachers didn't really cease the teasing.

> *I can remember everyone used to tease Duncan because he was kind of like the class clown, so everyone would make fun of him when he would get a*

really bad mark. I guess it was just the thing to do, and Duncan would always laugh it off or whatever, but the teachers would just be like, 'Ahhh', but they would never really stop it either.

John

John recalled his experiences of the competitiveness in the high schools.

There is a competitive mentality. It was most predominate, especially before and after tests. Before tests, you have three types of students. Those who have their noses in a book trying to flip through as many pages as they can to cover the last little bits, you have the people sitting there listening to their walkman or reading, and then you have the people who try to not look so overt, but would be looking through their notes. They would kind of slip them under the desk. So, there is that very much before the storm, but you would have different people like some were trying to scramble to study, but the mentality was always competitive so you could look around and say, 'Hum? Who is going to get the 98% on this one or who is going to get the 100% on this one?'

John further reported how students lost the ability to connect meaningfully with one another and the content of study,

We all became dissociated. Well, a lot of the class had the tendency to become that way, when they were focused on the marks. I think that dissociation separates us from what we are there for. We are not just there to learn knowledge. I think there is an overemphasis on marks, which is infused from both sides. Students feel that self-imposition, but it is also encouraged by the institutions and placed on the students, where the students with the highest marks are recognized and rewarded accordingly. There are pressures on both sides and also parents are involved as well. The whole process offers itself to that sentiment of how, I just have to cram this knowledge regardless of what it means. I have to be able to just answer these questions so that I can get to the next assignment. It is very much a means to an end, without any sense of meaning or purpose. The one thing that is supposed to fuel us to want to learn more, the very desire to thirst for knowledge, it is undercut.

John added dismissively that he didn't really bother with the competitiveness but rather ran his own course throughout high school.

I didn't really bother with that competitiveness. I have always really been put off by that competitive mentality. With that whole elitist mentality and striving for perfection, we give up and somehow eclipse the whole entire process of cultivating positive qualities. There is nothing positive about

trying to trip your neighbour, it is entirely negative and in so many ways it doesn't do anything healthy for the mind. I think when the whole education system becomes so competitive and vicious, it is so very detrimental psychologically and developmentally.

Marie

"There was a lot of, 'What did you get, what did you get?'" Marie mentioned about the days that test were returned in class.

It was hard to figure out what to say, because if you got a really good mark you got teased for being nerdy. Even in the level one classes, if I did do well, I didn't feel comfortable talking about my marks. It was challenging to do because everyone knew that I was the first one in the class. Usually, I ended up caving in and saying something. Now, for example, if I say, 'I did well', people don't ask me for my marks. My friends just say, 'Good for you.' Back then, if I said, 'I did well'. It was, 'How well did you do, did you do better than me, did you get a ninety, or did you get a ninety-five?'

Peter

Peter shared his experiences about earning a percentage grade for the first time and described how the percentages altered his experiences throughout school.

The percentages instead of letters in grades eleven and twelve helped me to step-it-up as far as my academics were concerned. It was a different thing all together. Before anyone who had an eighty-five to a hundred would be considered the same, but once we started getting percentages we started getting these divides between students. For instance, this guy got a 98% and this guy got a 90% and they are totally different marks. It is the difference between a five thousand dollar scholarship and a five hundred dollar scholarship. It was a huge moment in my life, when we started getting percentages.

Peter commented about his experiences on the days when tests were returned in class, and shared that peers would fight for the highest marks possible from the teacher and would try to keep their own marks a secret from other students.

They were weird days when tests were returned. I can remember tests being handed back in class and I would tuck mine away in a binder immediately, right away. I would take a look at it and it was usually, if it were math, it was a 100%. So, I would tuck it away and I would always have a handful of people and they would be like, 'What did you get?' If it were the hockey

guys who were asking, I would say, 'oh, I did alright, better than I thought.' If it were the really smart competitive type, I would give them a ballpark mark. I always had to be mindful of the way I responded. There was a certain group of people I didn't mind telling them straight up what I got, but others I would have to make something up. We were all vying for the same scholarships, and coming from a small community, the process was competitive and secretive. I can remember things like, for instance, when you got a mark back or something and these people who would want to know immediately what you got. You know like, 'What did you get?' So, they can like keep a running tab of your marks versus their marks. You would get your progress reports at mid-term and all of a sudden you see these groups of people herding around each other. No one wanted to give up their marks, but they wanted to know everyone else's marks! Students would get their marks back and there would be a line up at the teacher's desk fighting for marks, especially in those classes like Advanced Math or Calculus. I am sure I did it a few times, but there were people who did it every time. They were fighting for a half a mark here and a half a mark there. It was just like they were that competitive, and they cared that much about being perfect.

My Reflections

During high school, marks of the participants seemed to be a central aspect to who they were, how they defined themselves and others, and became what mattered most of all in the run of the day. I recognized, with their marks playing such a role, the participants and my former students often developed narrow definitions of who they were and ultimately, who they believed they could be. Their hopes for knowledge and learning seemed to be eroded by competitiveness, and teachers' rewards only reiterated their definitions that marks were what mattered. This emphasis on marks and grades tended to create a tension within their hope, because teacher support and accolades seemed to play a role in giving them hope in the first place.

John was different than the other participants. He did not allow himself to get caught in the net of needing accolades to feel and be successful. He spoke in detail of how he witnessed the viciousness of the competitive cycle of the classroom, and how he

was able to find more meaningful ways (i.e. completing the independent study, not playing the game involved with marks) to feel truly successful in the classroom.

In many ways, I feel that society has its own social narrative of competition that play out in the school systems and fosters narrow, confining hope. The very environment that attempts to foster the development of students, hope for the future, and life long learning, I believe actually tends to distorts the process, and encourages students to dissociate from what matters on a more fundamental human level – a sense of humanity. Competitiveness appeared to remove the humanity from the classes and stifled the hope, found in community and relationships, between my former students and the participants. Instead, their hope seemed to be found only in marks and out performing others, which in turn led to several students feeling alone. Further, I wonder if they are even more susceptible to risk when they fail to meet their own high academic standards.

Hope in a Competitive Community

A Story from My Research Journal

The bus had dropped us all off at the Student Union building on campus, and the university tour guides were supposed to meet us at 9:30. The fourth head count of the morning was completed but yielded five missing students. Panic set in as we, the three school counsellors, scanned the crowd for missing faces, surveyed the remaining students, and checked the list of names.

"Do you see Aidan and Jill?" I motioned to my colleague. It was Aidan who I had seen the other day storming out of the Advanced Calculus class.

"No," he replied, "Do you see Jenny, Heidi, or Brad?"

"No, where could they have gone within five minutes after getting off the bus?"

"Hum-hum, huff-hum, down by the coffee shop," a kind voice whispered, desiring not to "rat" out his fellow classmates.

"Thanks, I'll go," I commented to my colleagues.

"Morning Gang," I anxiously started as I approached the group of five. "I believe you are supposed to be waiting for the university tour in the lobby of the Student Union Building. Would you join us please?" Thankfully, three of the five started moving upstairs without challenge or confrontation.

"Ms. T., can we talk to you a moment?" Jenny inquired. "I know we are supposed to be upstairs, and we should have let you know where we were going, but …."

"What is going on? You are all great students and we thought you were all looking forward to this trip?"

"Oh, we are, and we are sorry, but Aidan and Jill have been at each other all week long. They are so competitive with each other on everything, and they just hate each other this term. They had a huge blow up in Calculus class the other day when Jenny beat Aidan and announced it to the whole class. The pressures of competing are really starting to bother him this term, and he is trying to do other things outside of school this year. We just don't know what to do or how to get them to work with each other."

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Peter

Overall, Peter found the experiences in the level one classes to be a positive source of motivation to work hard at school. Yet, he discussed how the mentality in the level one classes could also be stressful and hope challenging, especially when peers were not supportive of each other.

The whole experience was sort of a good motivation for me because when you are surrounded by people like that who all want to do well, it sort of motivates you to do the same. By surrounding yourself with people who are really driven, it is somewhat infectious. Yet, I can remember it was a source of stress, more stress than was needed. I remember studying to a point where I would go into a test and do reasonably well and it would have taken another hour or two before I am really up there to a point where I was getting my diminishing returns. I suppose, I was putting in the time because I wanted to do better than my classmates. Some of the students in the classes were actually friends with one another, but it seemed like they were only friends with one another so that they could know each other's marks or be in each others' clubs. I can remember going to ask someone and saying, 'You know how to do this question?' and they would say, 'Oh, well you don't know how to do that?' They would feel like they had gotten the edge on you. They wouldn't have had the time to explain it to you, but they would say, 'Here it is in the book go look for it, or whatever.'

Marie

Marie shared her comments about the competitive edge in schools and how her hope for the future was challenged by frustration. She shared how she thought that to be okay and to have a good future, she must be perfect.

It was frustrating because I was mature enough to realize that it was not a competition, and everybody else was really pushing that, but I was always trying to do the best that I could do. I was always comparing myself to others, which isn't a good thing to do and that whole, "What did you get? What did you get?" really wasn't helping that fact either. I always ended up feeling inadequate, even though now I can say that I shouldn't have, because there were times when I was ahead and there were times when other people were ahead. When other people were ahead, I got discouraged or frustrated with myself. As dramatic as it sounds, I can remember saying to myself, "Oh, I really want to get into Med. School!" after a bad test. I felt that I had to be absolutely amazing and perfect to get there and I put a lot of pressure on myself because of that fact.

David

David recalled about competing on a regular basis affected his levels of confidence.

Everyone wanted to do well. When one person got a 98%, you weren't happy for them, you just wanted it to be you. I had friends that I was competing against, and I know that the girl who had the first place ranking

didn't have very much confidence. She was like that pen over there on the floor; her confidence was low and horizontal.

Victoria

Victoria shared how people never really understood her need for competition or her frustration from earning a 99%. She also described how teachers play an important role within the competitive system.

You know that competition drives you to study and things like that, but in the long run when you beat him it is great, but when he beats you, it really knocks you down and it is like I am not good enough. I mean you are looking at a difference between a 99% and 100%. People never really did understand it. People couldn't understand why the rivalry? Why does she need to compete with everyone? When we get a test back, why are their fists pumping? Things like this, I never really thought about how it was going to make someone who had just scraped by actually feel. The whole system is like the food chain, like a hierarchy, and we were all competing to be at the top. When you don't get that mark you wanted, it is like the whole food chain is being slammed down your throat. Teachers actually made the whole separation worse because they were the ones putting the grades on our papers, they were the ones that gave you that little twinkle in their eye, they were the ones that were really impressed with something that you have done, and everyone wants that.

John

On the other hand, John suggested that the whole competitive environment was very esoteric and fragile. He saw the culture within the level one classes as being a "detrimental force" to the cultivation of learning and a force that could possibly do psychological harm to individuals.

A lot of the time I didn't worry about whether I was going to get a 98% or a 92% as much as the rest of the class. That is probably what divided me from them the most. A lot of the time, I just read in class. It always made me laugh, but Mr. Jackson would laugh as well. Mr. Jackson would sometimes just cackle out loud, like laugh out loud. He knew he was challenging them, some of the multiple choice questions were just so difficult some of the students would be crying. The students were pushed because to them marks were really important. When marks are the most important thing it is easy to be broken because you are going to have a test where you don't do so well.

Those tests drove them crazy, and it drove them to even greater ferociousness about their marks in class.

So, it is a very fragile environment and esoteric. I think the competitiveness stems primarily from the competition that some people felt weighed on these tests. I know in hindsight, I saw that as a more detrimental force rather than a positive force to the educational process and to the self-cultivation of the individuals within the system. In that it took something away from the humanity of the classes, where everyone was just concerned about the marks and there was that sense of ambiguity and everything was just empty and was just for the marks, not the experience, not for the questioning, or not for the beauty of the knowledge. I mean you cannot get a hundred on everything, but you can get it on almost everything if you really push yourself and you really do it.

They were happy and they considered themselves to be the most excellent of students. Yet, they incidentally became the most self-righteous and arrogant bunch, which is what bothered me the most. They felt that it is not just that I am doing really well. It is the, 'I am doing better that all you guys.' It is that complacency, and there is something very insidious about that. It is unhealthy. I think a lot of students are driven to mental breakdown because of it. I always felt that you didn't win the race by tripping other people; you win the race by running excellently, faster than your neighbour. The competition is a negative interaction, a negative loop that is created. You sort of want to trip each other and you are always so suspicious of one another. When you become overly concerned with what your neighbour is doing, you lose sight of the fact that you are trying to excel.

John thought awhile and then commented on how he avoided the competitiveness in order to maintain his own hopes.

I stayed almost completely away from it and they would laugh at me, but I always knew there was more to it. I mean the students who were concerned with it had a little group where they would get together and compare their marks and try to look through and figure out where they made mistakes and then try to challenge the teacher to give them a little bit more of a mark. This always got me, and this is when I pulled out a book.

My Reflections

While competition served to push these students towards higher marks, its social influence seemed to be often insidious and destructive. For most participants, competitive relationships seemed to feel entrapping, because there were both necessary and torturous. The competitiveness between gifted academically achieving students

appeared to threatened the sense of community and camaraderie. Participants described relationships distorted by competitiveness, seemingly characterized by superficiality and shallowness. Often times the relations between the former academically achieving high school students existed for self-serving intentions and with destructive results. Such threats appeared to serve to undercut the passion, vision, hope, and sense of purpose in academically achieving gifted students. The students in the study appeared to lose sight of the meaning of education and focused solely on achieving high marks and earning external recognition. Hope appeared to be reduced to its most "thin" expression. Hope seemed to be solely goal-focused, rather than embedded in relationships which affirmed the student as a valuable part of the community regardless of academic performance. Indeed, hope in relationships for these students appeared to suffer in the face of relentless competition.

According to the former high school students in this study, teachers seemed to offer different types of relationships within this competitive framework, as often they supported, acknowledged, and rewarded high marks. Yet, it appears that teachers also needed to be mindful of supporting the students and their beliefs in themselves as human beings, regardless of any one particular outcome on a test or assignment. It seems that students needed to be recognized for their value as human beings regardless of the grades they achieved. Somehow this needs to be shared in a way that the students understand this as a main message from their teachers.

Hope in the Pursuit of Scholarly Recognition: A Double Edge Sword

A Story from my Research Journal

"Rosalie, would you please call Aidan down to the main office for me," I asked the secretary the day after our university field trip. I knew there was more going on for him as a student and felt that I should follow up and offer support.

"Can it wait until after the bell? The students are almost finished first period and it would be better to interrupt the students during the break," Rosalie replied.

"No problem at all. When he does arrive at the main office, please just send him along to see me in my guidance office," I mentioned, hoping he would come. I didn't know him very well, and I had not had a lot of interaction with him prior to the field trip. Should I go with the old standard guidance counsellor, how is your grade twelve year going or be a little more blunt about how he is handling the competitive situation with Jenny?

I waited for Adian's arrival.

"Hi, you asked to see me?" Aidan started as he walked in with a confused look upon his face. "Is this about yesterday? Am I in trouble?"

"Not anymore, the head count matched the number on the list on the way home." I offered somewhat jokingly to create a bit of comic relief. Unfortunately, he didn't laugh, and he didn't relax. "So well, how is your grade twelve year going?"

Sensing my cover up question, he apologized. "I am sorry I ran off on the group yesterday, I really didn't mean to cause you or the other counsellors grief. I am just really having a hard time keeping it all together this year. It is the end of the first semester and I am working so very hard, and it never seems to be enough."

"Enough for what?" I queried.

"To matter," Aidan said. "I was walking down the hallway the other day, and one of my favorite teachers stopped me in the hallway. He said, 'What is wrong with you this year Adian? I heard you are no longer ranked number one. I hope everything is all right?' What is up with that anyway? I know he had positive intentions, but come on."

"You must have been hurt by his comments. How did you respond," I replied in shock.

"I don't think I did; I just kept going," Adian said.

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Victoria

Victoria shared about her hopes to be recognized in school.

> *Every year at my high school, they give out those awards to the best student, and it was never me. Never me, I was always just like everybody else and that bothered me. That despite the fact, that I was head and shoulders above most, I didn't get any recognition for it. I mean sure, I was always competing trying for it, but it just never happened. And at the end of first term in twelfth grade, I was ranked number one and didn't see a thing for it." Victoria recalled. "When you were a kid, it is all about being the best and everybody wants to be the best and it is at whatever thing. And, you push yourself to be the best and that was the only way I knew how to push myself.*

Victoria also recalled a story about what happened to her when she stood out too far from the crowd and how her hope was challenged tremendously when her classmates were cruel.

> *We were working on graphic calculator stuff and a few of my classmates got tired of working, so they hauled out the graphic calculators and hit 2nd function Alpha, and started typing away. They typed in any insult imaginable under the sun and handed it over to me. So, I was reading along and I didn't realize what the last line of this thing actually was. It was 'Oh, she is ugly, she is annoying, she is loud, and on and on.' And, being in this culture and knowing that there is a punch line at the end and then all of a sudden, 'Boom' as big as it can be. There is your name staring you back in*

> *the face, 'That is why I hate Victoria Graham!' I was furious and deflated. It felt like the whole hierarchy was fighting back against those students who were on the top! I started looking at other people and wondering what they were saying behind my back.*

Peter

Peter also mentioned that in high school,

> *You don't want to be the guy that is behind the scenes because you don't get recognized. There is no recognition there, but you don't want to be the person right in the forefront of everything because you are opened to all these jabs of whatever and those who will say, 'You could have done this better.' They are all competing for recognition, bragging rights, something for your resume. Recognition is like the currency in those classes.*

Peter compellingly described how,

> *Looking back, I never wanted to be this little kid in grade ten who stood out so much and who thought he was a hot shit and had people thinking maybe we should show him who is boss and call him names or leave nasty notes on his desk.*

My Reflections

I understand a large measure of hope, with respect to goals and achievement, came from the recognition offered by others and what it represented for my former students; however, I recognize now that the participants often didn't want to receive the recognition in a public fashion. They described the double bind or double edge sword that existed in their high schools surrounding recognition. When they earned acknowledgement from others, they felt a sense of hope in their accomplishments. Yet, standing above the rest often placed these students in situations where they could be ridiculed by their peers and expected to continue doing well by themselves and others. The participants shared how they wanted the "right" kind of recognition, because there was a risk of getting the "wrong" kind when they put themselves "out there" where they

could be noticed. In other words, students sought recognition that appropriately acknowledged their accomplishments and that was given in a more private fashion.

In the top level classrooms, as a school counsellor, I noticed that recognition appeared to become the currency that manipulated the top level classrooms and ultimately the students. I believe that students learned that to be successful in the academic world they must achieve, and to achieve often meant they lost their friends and had to draw attention to themselves and their accomplishments. Their world appeared to be largely controlled by external rewards, which left little room for internal or intrinsic motivations. The students sought recognition for what they could do, and they seemed to believe recognition and marks mattered above most anything else. Yet, they often feared the seemingly inevitable negative ramifications of public attention to their success including being called, 'the smart kid,' having nasty notes left on their belongings, or being outcast.

Understanding Hope when Self is Narrowly Defined

A Story from my Research Journal

Shortly after the Christmas holiday break, students in New Brunswick High Schools started writing their first semester final exams. It was always a stressful time around the high school as witnessed by the increased guidance appointments, arguments with teachers, and overall somber mood in the hallways. In the high school where I was a school counsellor, students were exempt from writing certain exams if they earned marks above 85%; however, all grade eleven students had to write the dreaded provincial exams in the core subjects of English and math.

I remember well the last day of classes before exams. Students who had earned their exemptions were flying high at the thought of being finished their first semester.

While those who had to write exams, walked sullenly out of their classrooms to their buses knowing full well they would be back to school on Monday morning. It was always easy to tell who had to write exams the next week. There was one particular pre-examination week I remember vividly, and I still question my own judgment.

It was lunch hour at the school, a time when most students go to the cafeteria and eat and socialize with their friends or partake in a school club or extra-curricular activity. The office announcements were always long at the beginning of lunch hour. The main office served as the hub of social activities and communications from home or teachers. During the long list of noon hour activities from the office, a female student walked into my office with her head low and sat on my couch without announcement or acknowledgement. I knew her as an energetic, social, bright, ambitious young woman. Yet, for the first time in all of our encounters, I felt like I was getting to know a part of her that I had never met. I could see from her behaviours that she needed time and space. As for her reasons, I was not certain.

"Lana, just let me know if you need anything," I offered and turned in my desk chair, knowing that I wouldn't get a reply. She stared at the floor, with her arms folded tightly to her chest. I waited a moment, remembering my counselling professor's discussion on the power of silence, but it yielded no response. Having much to do on my lunch hour, I turned back towards my desk, nibbled on a muffin, and started at my work.

Three quarters of an hour passed before I heard a word from Lana, "It is difficult to do everything well. Sometimes, I just hate my life, and I want it to end. No one really understands what it is like to be me."

Placing my pen down on my desk, I slowly turned back around to face Lana, "What is it like to be you?"

"I feel like I have to be perfect in all that I do. Do well in school, be nice to my friends, be a 'good-girl', get good grades so I can get scholarships, look pretty, get involved in community activities, do things that matter," she explained. "I just want to be who I am and not have to worry about being perfect all the time."

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Peter

Peter honestly shared his reflections on his own perfectionistic ways.

> *There are certainly seeds of perfectionism in me for sure. The people in those enriched classes applied the same formula to everything in their lives. Like they were not mediocre at anything they did in life, anything they weren't good at they seemed to avoid. They did most things with such intensity. With striving for perfectionism, you get yourself noticed and you get recognition and it will open doors. It was really difficult because the time wasn't there to do it all. For instance, trying to have a girlfriend, have friends, go out, study, do well in sports and other stuff, it was tough. I would get tests back and I would want a 100%. I would study for a hundred on my tests. I knew that I could probably get like 90% on this test, but I want to get a hundred. So, I would put in a little extra time and try to do as well as I could. When you are near the top, it was me and this other girl who were the top two, you just say to yourself if I pour it on right now maybe I will get valedictorian and the top marks in the class. As soon as I found out I was near the top, I knew I had to keep that up."*

Laughingly, Peter indicated,

> *I can definitely relate to being a perfectionist! I am my biggest critic, and I put the most pressure on myself. It is not from my parents or my friends, it is from me.*

Marie

Marie shared her memories of the pressures that resulted from her perfectionistic ways.

> *The pressure was crazy. It was really difficult sometimes, I would always push myself and I wasn't happy with any mark that was under ninety-five. It just wasn't good enough for me," When I look back now, I wonder what I was thinking, but at the time, I got stressed out before a test if I didn't know absolutely everything and that was the end of the world. I guess there was*

always a fear, not only was med. school important, but also scholarships, and I knew I needed those scholarships to go away for university.

Victoria

Victoria remembered how,

I spent a lot more time on things than I had to because I was a perfectionist, and I probably could have gotten away with less. I always put 110% into everything. I didn't find that it drained my hope when I was rewarded, but it was exhausting when I wasn't.

Victoria recalled two specific situations in her own academic career when her perfectionism became problematic. One occurred early in her university life and the other happened in elementary school.

I was in fifth grade, I forgot about a math test and didn't study the night before. I ended up with 78%. It was the lowest mark, I had to that point in grade five. A 78% on a math test, which isn't a bad mark but, I cried and cried and cried. Bringing that test home to my parents to show them that I made a 78% on a math test because I didn't study was horrible. I felt like I had let them down to no end. It was horrible. I thought they were going to think that I was stupid, like, what is going on with this kid? It was a travesty. You are just absolutely obliterated, it is like somebody hit you with a Mac truck and you don't know how to get up and walk again after that. It is not just letting down Mom and Dad, and feeling like I know I could have done better, but it is looking at your teacher, when she says to you, "What happened?" It is awful. So, I did tell her I forgot about the test and that I didn't study, but the look on her face. The look on her face, I knew that I had disappointed her. I felt like I had let everybody down.

The second occurred at university in Physics class. After that point in grade five, the lowest mark I had seen on a test was 80%. Physics was always easy in high school. Mrs. Shannon didn't really push us as hard as she could have, but then again how could she when there were people just scraping by in that class? In university, they really push you, you are not spoon fed, they don't tell you to do your homework, and they don't tell you to give yourself homework. They give you a weekly assignment that you and ten other people collaborate on. You really, everyone has to put their heads together to get those assignments done. And, the tests are not nearly as hard as those assignments, but the tension is so high concerning those tests and you go in and you are just like, 'I have no idea what to do with this? I have no idea what to do with this?' That, in and of itself, is a challenge, but you go and you write this test and you know walking out of it that you have just bombed! Of course as a person who is used to doing well, when you bombed a test you feel like you got nothing right on that page. Sure, half of it might

be right on the page, but you feel like you have done absolutely nothing, and that you are getting a zero not a fifty. At that moment, everything is riding on it. So, you get that test back a week later and you are a mark away from passing, one mark away from passing that first test in Physics. Well, suddenly all the marks you have been getting back in all of your other classes just don't matter anymore and it is all about that one class. It stays with you, it is like a dark cloud that follows you all over the place and decides to throw down those thunder bolts and rain on you whenever it wants. It spills into everything.

Victoria also reflected on how she worried about receiving a bad mark on her transcript and how the experience shattered her hope.

It is devastating to every part of you, as far as hope goes. Looking back at that one mark, when people look at my transcript are people going to see that one mark and think, 'Okay, she is great in everything else, but what happened here? Why couldn't she make it work here?' Sure everything may have been outstanding, but are people going to see that mark and focus on it?

David

Perfect marks also served to challenge David's hopes throughout high school.

Getting a 71% at the mid-term mark really challenged my hope. It happened because we only had one unit test before we were issued our mid-term mark. So, I couldn't make up the marks that I needed to order to bring up my overall mark. I know my hope was challenged, but I just focused on what I had to do. I know I am a perfectionist, that would be a very fair statement. It is good and bad to be a perfectionist. You know that you can't be perfect at everything you do, but you always want to try to be and that is very difficult. Being a perfectionist depreciates your hope because you know you can never be perfect at everything. Yet, you try really hard to be.

Jay

Jay shared how tiresome it was to maintain his perfectionistic ways in so many areas of his life throughout high school.

It was difficult to maintain your perfectionism at school. Sometimes you would work really hard for that one test or project and get like an amazing mark and you would say, 'Oh great.' But, it is so hard to keep that same level of keenness. I remember in the beginning of each term in high school, I would be so keen and eager to do really, really well, but then it would be just like kind of subside and you would do the last minute studying before the test,

the night before studying kind of deal. It is so hard to maintain that keenness of initiative to do well over and over again. I didn't find that people expected me to be perfect all the time, but I just remember when you were gifted and outgoing people would take advantage of you. If there were certain tasks that needed to be done and someone needed to be a lead on this project other students would always push certain people into those areas. When that would happen to me, I wished I could have said, 'And, well don't I have a say in this?' It would just be a group consensus that I was going to go into that leadership position. Once I was in that leadership position, it always felt like here I go again, and I have to be good in this because everyone wants me to be. I honestly do not know, if I was being perfect for me or just pleasing people, and making sure people were happy with me because I am the type of person that hates conflict and hates confrontation. It is always like, "Ahhhh, I have to be the happy person all the time. As a student I wanted to keep everyone happy, keep my parents happy, my teachers happy, and my marks. You don't want your marks to slide. There is so much of an expectation to be this good well-rounded person who is always smiling and happy. I remember in high school when I had a bad day and everyone was like, 'What is wrong?' I would be like 'Oh, crap. Why do I have to explain this to people?' I would be thinking, 'Leave me alone,' and they would be like, 'why aren't you smiling?'

Jay hauntingly shared stories from his experiences that resulted from attempting to be perfect throughout high school.

Well, okay I will tell you one of the biggest things that happened this year at university. After first term, I started hanging around with this other group of students, I started skipping like a lot of my classes, and so I started doing a lot of really stupid things. One time, I was coming home from New Pointe, there were four people in the car, and we weren't wearing our seat belts. We were doing something we should not have been doing, and all of a sudden the wheels of the car spun out. There were sparks all over the place. Thank goodness my friend, who was driving, didn't put his foot on the brake, because when the car guy came out he said that if my friend had of put his foot on the pedal or brake the car would have flipped and none of us were wearing seat belts. There were four of us in the car, and we were petrified by what we had heard. The whole incident scared the shit out of us. You know, I learned my lesson for about a week and then for some reason, I was doing the same crap I was before the accident.

Upon reflection on his story Jay described,

I guess for some reason, I had my teenage rebellion a little bit later in life, like this past year. I guess for once, I felt that I was finally in university, and screw everything. I want to do what I want to do, and so I did a lot of really stupid stuff. After that situation happened, I kind of smartened up for a little

while but then I got back into another little rut. One of my really close friends died this year in a car accident, and I know I could have been in that car. So, I started thinking about what I was doing and what I wanted. But after that whole incident, there was another situation that I have never told anyone, not even my friends or my parents before this point.

Jay collected himself and somberly shared his story,

Another time, I am fairly certain I got in a car with a drunk driver. I was quite inebriated myself, so I wasn't sure. I wasn't sure until I got home and I woke up the next morning. I began asking myself, "What did I do, am I an idiot?" I guess I really went down hill for a while.

Then something happened where I had an epiphany, and I realized that I really had to start looking after myself. So, after my friend died in the car accident, I started saying, "No". I stopped answering the phone calls when certain people called and I stopped going out. His death had a huge effect on me. It really did, I went to see the guy, who was driving the car that my friend died in after the accident, at the hospital. He was all drugged up on morphine and just out of it. He told me what happened and all this stuff and described what happened to my friend. I guess it just really hit home because when I think back on it now, that could have very well been me in the same situation, and it scared the shit out of me. It really did. It really did. That is something I have never told my parents about. I have not even told them about the accident where my friend was killed.

Jay paused in his story and then continued with his reflections about tying hope so closely to achievement.

I think after first term at university, I had tried so hard to do well and I did poorly for the first time in school. Then in second term, I pulled up my sleeves and started to work. I was just feeling so crappy about myself. I worked so hard, and I got nothing. So, I guess it was a loss of hope for me because I was just so angry that I was not receiving anything in return for my efforts. I had done all this work, and I got nothing out of it, and I started to just not care. It is a really big blow to my self-esteem and I didn't know who I was anymore. Like the first time you experience that rejection, like I have experienced rejection before, but not in such a substantial way. It wasn't all about the grades, there was other stuff that happened too, but that was a large part of it. It was the first time that I had put out a lot of work and energy into school that I just got a minimal type reward. I felt like I couldn't continue to do all that work. I was so drained after mid-terms and exams at university.

Without earning the grades he wanted, Jay didn't see a purpose in working hard. When his sense of achievement waned, a main source of hope and a sense of himself was lost.

> *I never was juvenile, like growing up as a kid I was always an angel. I had never even been grounded before to tell you the truth. I had always thought that I just had to be that perfect person, perfect in everyway. When I couldn't be perfect, even though I was trying to be, I was just like screw it. I was so sick and tired of living up to this or these standards, I just started hanging out with people that I shouldn't have been hanging out with, and then it went downhill.*

My Reflections

Being perfect likely meant something different to each of my participants. For some, it referred to obtaining perfect marks, while for others it meant being perfect socially, being liked by everyone. I believe perfectionism denotes a unidimensional perspective of how things in life should be. It somehow doesn't allow or encourage flexibility, vision, or imagination. On the other hand, hope thrives on possibilities and appears to be challenged by perfectionistic approaches. According to participants, hope seems to fall flat when it is pegged solely against the acquisition of excellent grades. In this sense, perfectionism seems to offer a shallow definition of hope.

In life, I tend to remember the negative things more vividly than the positive, and it seems that for those who experience perfectionism, this critical perspective is also very present. It is difficult to understand where students' hopes may be when one of the biggest critics in their lives, themselves, is intent on saying that their performance is not good enough. It appears that being perfect may lead to a narrow definition of self and a shaky foundation from which to build a sense of identity.

When academically achieving gifted students have a goal focused hope fixed primarily on high marks, hope for these students seems shallow and somewhat

misguided. I believe that students need to be encouraged to search for something more, something deeper, and something more meaningful throughout their educational careers. As Jay's story illustrates, when academically achieving gifted students push themselves to be perfect all the time, they may feel shattered and lose themselves in potentially damaging ways when perfection is not achieved.

It appears that for some students it was not 'all right' to feel unhappy and to have other people see them in an unhappy mood or frame of mind. This perceived expectation to be perfectly happy appeared to be an integral part of being 'all right' with who they were as individuals. As a school counsellor, I found that, for certain academically achieving students, they had to keep their marks high and be happy all the time in order to consider themselves all right in their peer community. This very process seemed to challenge their deeper sense of hope in themselves and their sense of belonging for they felt that aspects of themselves and their experiences were not acceptable. These beliefs appeared to restrict what they believed could be possible for themselves in the moment and in the future. When certain students received low marks, I found that they felt rejected by their teachers, community, and themselves. The self-rejection may be particularly damaging. Indeed, the self-criticism, experienced by some students, seemed to threaten any sense of hope they might hold in themselves as being valuable and worthwhile human beings.

Being in a Different Academic Environment and Finding Hope in Belonging

A Story from My Research Journal

Various universities across Canada host a national program called Shad Valley for academically achieving gifted students during the summer month of July. Application packages for the very selective program arrive in the high schools in early February.

Each high school handles the application procedures differently. Certain high schools simply hand out the forms to interested students, while others handle the application procedures by offering the program to all students and work with the group of students who are interested in applying. While I was working as a counsellor, I offered the program to all students and worked with the group of students who were keen on applying. The group became known as my 'Ducklings' because they followed my every piece of advice precisely. Often times, we would meet after school to work on their application forms and the various creative documents the application package required.

"Please pass the Cadbury Mini Eggs," I asked to the group.

"No problem," Sarah replied. "What else do you guys think I should I put on my creative page?"

"A pair of shoes," Parker snickered. "Let them know how much you love fashion!"

"Oh, and a football," Hunter smiled. "You just love football players!"

"That is not funny," Sarah shot back across the table. "Although it may be true, they don't need to know about that."

"Okay team, let's try to get these finished before five o'clock. Also, remember we have to make those sponsorship calls first thing in the morning, so make sure you leave notes for your homeroom teachers. Oh, and pass the Cadbury Eggs again please," I reminded the Ducklings in one of the many nightly meetings.

Six months later, as we were all sitting around the table eating chocolate sundaes, I remember looking at my students, after their experience at Shad Valley, thinking they had all changed and experienced something dramatically new. They looked excited, yet peaceful and confident. They spoke of their relationships with peers, and discussed how

they felt as though they belonged and established lifelong connections with the students they met at the program. Having the opportunity to learn with other students of similar ability in a non-threatening, non-competitive environment had altered their way of being in the world.

...

Throughout the interviews, I determined that three of the six participants had participated in the Shad Valley program. They shared similar views on their experience and offered the following in response to my questions concerning their involvement.

David

With a smile upon his face, David reflected on the program.

> ***What I remember the most was the social aspects of the program, not so much the academic parts or components. It wasn't like high school. There were not the social cliques that there were in high school. In high school, I sometimes felt very different from other students. Yet, at the program, I felt that others understood me, as if they got all my little jokes and you could speak using those puns that most people didn't get in high school. I felt a sense of connection with the other students, and have remained very good friends with some people. The program was also great because, it was an exploratory learning experience where you were not graded or in competition with your friends. In that sense, it was a wonderful atmosphere.***

David further shared how,

> ***Well, it was reassuring to know that a country bumpkin, from New Brunswick, could keep up with all the other gifted students from across Canada. It was nice to know I could keep up with the bright students from Toronto and British Columbia and be competitive on that national scale. The whole thing gave me a lot of hope. You left that place feeling like you could do anything and take on the challenges out there that would present themselves. It gave me a lot of confidence in my abilities as a student and a sense of connection.***

Jay

With confidence Jay recalled his experiences with the program.

The program was awesome. I loved it. At first, when I got there I didn't know what to expect, so I didn't really feel like I was in the program because everyone had such a different experience. I kept saying to myself, is this Shad? We would go to lectures all day until supper and I was like, 'Is this what the program is all about?' It is so weird, but it was interesting at first, and then after a while even some of the students, who very keen, felt there were too many lectures. We didn't have enough time to do the research and the construction of the products. Looking back now, when I think of Shad Valley, I remember running around the entire city doing things in two hours to get all these parts together and going to Home Depot and using their machines. Running to meet the train with this huge disorganized piece of wood that was taped together, just running together down to the train, felt amazing. It was a lot of work, but it was a great experience! Just all the little things made it great. Meeting people, it was kind of awkward at first because no one really knew each other, and it was kind of weird. Everyone had their cliques at first but then it just started, I am not super outgoing, but in that environment you kind of had to be, you had to make an extra effort. The students were so diverse. There were so many different students from different ends of the spectrum. There were students who were really good in concrete subjects like math and sciences, and then there were all the well rounded students, who were involved with everything, which is kind of what I was. It was like kind of funny because there were like introverts and extroverts who were in the program. I don't know it was just interesting because everyone really got along really well. It was fun being with people who were kind of like-minded as well. It definitely made me feel more comfortable and more outgoing, because I have always been like kind of outgoing, but not to the extent of being forced into a situation and having to deal with different issues with people who knew what they were doing in life as well.

Jay noted how the program,

definitely gave me more confidence. Like, 'I am a part of this.' It gave me a sense of accomplishment, like I have accomplished something big and when our project won the whole thing, it was a real confidence builder as well. And, then when we won the national cup that was a huge accomplishment.

When Jay returned home from the program, he said that going to the program,

doesn't make you feel better than anyone else, it just makes you feel more comfortable with who you are. I remember just all, the friends that I made and all the fun that we had or whatever. First thing would be like the friends, and second thing would be all the hard work we had to do, and

thirdly, would be all the friends again and all of the great memories that we had together! Over the long run, well the program certainly got me ready for university because I had never really sat in on lectures before and we had lectures everyday, and we always had to take notes for some reason. I am not sure why, but we did it and I got use to the process. I guess it gave me more options. It basically just showed me that there are more options to life than just like – a doctor or lawyer. When you go to the program, you realize there are so many more career opportunities. There are so many things, like wide topics, you could talk to anyone about really. So, it was just really educational and a great experience just to have that.

Marie

Marie contentedly reported that going to Shad Valley was,

the best month of my life! It was like, I had never been in one place where everybody was so keen. The program was kind of taking the top two or three from all the level one classes across the country and putting them all together. I remember the very first day, knowing that this month was going to be incredible, because I had never been in a place where people actually came up to me and shook my hand and said, "Hello, my name is... I am from... what do you do... this is what I do.... what are your interests?" It is a very comfortable environment and you don't feel afraid to answer questions, and you don't feel afraid to answer questions at the program.

Marie remembered the other students more than any other aspect of the program.

the people, I met there for sure and the lectures and seminars were great, but it was more the people and how quickly, I became so close to those people, really so quickly. I think it happened because at the program you can absolutely be 100% who you are.

After attending the program as a student, Marie was hired at one of the university Shad programs to work with other students throughout the summers. Considering her work for the program, Marie described that

even now when I work for the program, I am not afraid to stand up on a chair and talk to people. It is okay, because everyone else is doing it as well. And, when you are able to be yourselves, people relax and see that and when people see you being comfortable with yourself people want to be with you.

Marie menitoned that overall,

it was a very motivating and inspiring experience. I remember saying, 'Yeah, I can do this; these people are inspiring and amazing. And, I got here too.

> *This is possible; I can do what I want to do in life.' There are lots of other programs that are similar, like Encounters with Canada, but part of what makes the program so incredible, is that not only do you have the best of the best there, but students are there for four weeks. They live together, they work together, they play together, and they sleep in the same rooms. You cannot get that in a high school situation. You cannot get that intensity, it is a reasonably small group and it is very static, no one is coming in or out of the program. There are sixty kids at each university and it is just that group for the whole month. The lack of competition does something as well, I am sure it does. Yeah, because I think there is competition at the program, but it is in groups and it is team oriented. Students are learning for the sake of learning, they are not learning for marks, and they are not learning to out-do or one-up each other. It is not about that, it is about learning for the sheer enjoyment and the passion of acquiring knowledge.*

My Reflections

As I reflect on the participants' stories and my own experiences as a high school counsellor, I believe the national programs, like Shad Valley, offer academically achieving students an opportunity to be with 'like minded' individuals and to be who they understood themselves to be for an entire month. In being themselves, they had the opportunity to develop relationships, form connections, re-learn the love of learning, and feel like they belonged to a group without having to compete with each other or compare specific high school marks. (There were no individual grades in Shad Valley.) They could own, explore, and display their abilities without the pain that often accompanied these behaviours in high school. The relationships, sense of accomplishment, and genuine learning environment gave the students a sense of hope. It opened the doors to what is possible and impacted their sense of a positive future that could embrace their abilities and passions. This sense of hope appeared deeper, more meaningful, and more durable in nature than those hopes gleamed simply from receiving a high mark on a test.

Although many of the students that I worked with as a school counsellor earned acceptance into programs, such as Shad Valley, several academically achieving students

did not. Shortly after receiving the news of their rejection, the students appeared quite depressed at what they referred to as their "failure".

One particular student that applied to Shad Valley, at the same time as two other students who were accepted, initially struggled with not being accepted by the national program. He was very involved with the other students' applications and experiences, and subsequently, he learned about the programs from these other students. Hence, in his final year of high school, he didn't shy away from applying to other national enrichment programs and was accepted to a similar summer program. As I reflect on this student, I suspect that this initial rejection taught him to remain hopeful in the spite of the defeat. As a student, he has continued to place himself in challenging situations and has a sense of confidence in his own abilities.

Understanding Hope While Experiencing Pressures

A Story from my Research Journal

Scholarship season was one of my favourite times at work. As a school counsellor, I enjoyed proofreading the many essays students were required to write for the plethora of national, regional, and local scholarships. Their essays metaphorically provided me with a looking glass to understand how they truly viewed themselves and their accomplishments. I tried to be understanding of the difficulties students encountered while writing about themselves, as they worked to articulate why they felt they would be the most suitable candidate for various awards. I used to offer sessions and workshops on application procedures for scholarships, and many academically achieving gifted students would arrive solely for the purpose of discovering how to effectively write about their talents and themselves. I knew that receiving scholarships for most of the students was a critical part of their hope and their future academic goals.

Yet, as a school counsellor, I failed to recognize how much pressure they were truly under and how they felt when they finally received or didn't receive their awards.

At the grade twelve banquet, held towards the end of April at our school, teachers and graduates starting gearing up for the graduation ceremony at year's end. At my first grade twelve banquet at the large high school, I was curious to see how the night would unfold. I remember sitting in my place at the teachers table looking admiringly around the room at my students, who were all dressed in their finest, when one of them walked up to me and placed a letter down on the table next to my napkin.

"Read it, but don't tell anyone." George whispered, trying not to draw attention to himself.

"What?"

"Talk to you tomorrow at lunch, okay?" He said as he walked away.

Without thought, I responded, "Okay."

Seeking to respect his wishes, I placed the letter in my shoulder bag to read at a later time and in a less public space. Curious though, I left my half eaten lasagna meal and walked back to my office to read the letter. Silently, I read the letter…

> Dear Mr. George K. Holterman:
>
> Congratulations! You have been named the 2000-2001 Lord Strathmore's Recipient and are entitled to a $10 000 renewable (up to four years) Scholarship from the University of Dungarven.

I read the first line and neatly folded it back together. My heart raced with joy as I walked out of my office and back to the cafeteria, but why didn't he want anyone to know? This was the first time in the history of our school that any student had ever received such a prestigious award. I wondered to myself, why he not had told anyone?

How did he feel about receiving this honour? Wanting to be respectful when I reached the cafeteria, I simply returned to my seat and finished my lasagne.

At noon hour the next day as promised, George walked into my office and sat in his usual seat behind the bookcase, so no one could see that he was the student I was talking with from the glass in the office door.

"Wow, CONGRATULATIONS, YIPEEEE!!!!!" I started.

"Thanks," George motioned with a tenth of my enthusiasm and excitement.

"You know you are the first student recipient from our school," I tried to elicit a more energetic response.

"Yeah, but I do not want anyone to know, and I think I am going to turn it down. My parents want me to go to that school, and I am just not sure if it is right for me. And, I really don't want anyone else to know." George stated without question.

I changed my approach witnessing his quiet reaction, "How I can support you through these tough decisions?"

"I don't know right now. I just don't want anyone to know, not even my parents."

"Sure, but you should know that towards the end of the year the Principal will receive a letter from the University of Dungarven detailing which of her students received scholarship offers, and because it makes the school look good, she will share the information."

"Yeah, I remember from last year how all the names were announced. I hate how it all becomes so public."

.....

Jay

Jay sighed and described the pressures he felt to earn scholarships. He commented on how the scholarships affected his hopes.

> *There was definitely a lot of pressure. My parents encouraged me to apply for everything. It was important, and it was somewhat funny because I was the one in grade twelve who got the Centennial Scholarship. It was weird because I was the last person anyone would have expected to get it. At times, I didn't even think I was going to finish the application. I just didn't feel like I was going to get it because a whole bunch of other students who had slightly higher averages than I did applied for it, and no one received it. No one else from our school got it except for me, and I was kind of like whooo – yeah! It was a huge confidence builder for me, but it was also a kind of downer as well, because when people found out they were like, 'You got it?' I didn't expect it at all, and I am not the type of person that would rub it in, so at first, I didn't think I should tell anyone. Another friend of mine once told me that she didn't want to tell other people her test marks because it brought her too much attention, both positive and negative. So, at first I didn't think I should tell anyone, and then I did. I really didn't think about it, I thought other people would have gotten one as well. Once I told them, I could kind of feel a hint of 'Damn it, I didn't get one' from the other students. I felt anxious and kind of guilty, but kind of proud of myself as well. I just didn't want to be arrogant.*

Peter

Getting money from scholarships meant that Peter could continue with his education at a reputable school. He described the experience of not earning scholarships as being hope challenging, but commented that when he received a scholarship he felt hope for the future.

> *There was a lot of pressure to get scholarships, I was confident because my marks were high, but you know university is still ridiculously expensive for the whole year. All along, I knew that if I got good marks, I could get the money, and if I got the money I could go to school. So, the scholarship applications would take hours to fill out, and getting all those reference letters was a challenge. I won the Centennial Scholarship, but I remember applying for the Merit scholarship. I got a call saying they needed me to come to this interview at the University of New Brunswick. So, there were ten students at this interview all from New Brunswick. I forget now but, I think it was for five thousand dollars or something. I did the interview for the entire day. I did the interview with a panel in the morning, and then with*

two individual guys in the afternoon. The next day, I got a call and they were like, 'No, sorry we are not going to select you for the scholarship.' That was the first scholarship I heard back from, and it was a blow. So, if there was anything that was hope defeating, that experience was. To go all the way to Fredericton for this interview, and not get the scholarship. It wasn't a month later that I heard back from the Centennial Scholarship, and I completed the phone interview with them and they were like, 'Yeah, we have selected you.' So, anything that was hope crushing or discouraging was really completely abolished when I won that award. Any burden I was carrying of the debt that I was going to have to incur because of university, not only on me, but also on my mom and dad, that was lifted. I was able to just enjoy school and that gave me hope as well.

David

David reflected on his experience of receiving scholarships and noted how his scholarships became a family affair.

I got a letter from such and such university, and the letter said, 'We are offering you the Welton scholarship.' It was the biggest scholarship they had. It was five grand a year plus an additional twenty five hundred in the first year. I was sitting there knowing full well my parents were going to say, 'Money is important!' I had not saved up money of my own, and I was banking on getting a scholarship somewhere. I kept waiting, waiting, and waiting for the mail to come at the end of the day, hoping that the university that I wanted to go to would offer me something. Then I remember getting a phone call from the university that I was hoping to attend.

'Hi, this is Sonya Ifko at the scholarship office, you have been short listed for the Mackenzie Scholarship, but in the meantime we are offering you five thousand dollars a year. You will have you interview in a week's time for the Mackenzie Scholarship, and will have a chance to earn eight thousand instead of five thousand a year.'

I was thrilled, but then it was a big week of pressure before that telephone call. My parents put a lot of pressure on me. They said, 'Go and research the Mackenzie family in case they ask you any questions. You make sure that phone is charged so you can talk.' They even kicked my brother out of the house at the time they were supposed to call. Well, his room was right next to mine and sometimes with his temper tantrums, they said to him, 'You are out of the house for an hour.' I think Mom actually took him somewhere, and Dad was downstairs while I waited for this phone call. I'm sure I could hear my Dad pacing outside my room at one point while I was having that interview. So, they did put a lot of pressure on me. It was kind of an expensive phone call, so it was fairly important in that sense.

David reflected for a moment and then continued,

> *Well, I think there was both pressure from me because I hate not succeeding, and I am competitive. At the same time, there was a little bit of institutional pressure which I am just going to say is the collection of everything. Your parents want you to do well, your other friends are doing well, you know the school says you have to do this, and you know how 90 is only 90 percent of a 100. I mostly think it was just me, and just a collection of all those institutional kinds of pressures throughout the process.*

My Reflections

When I reflect on what was shared by these students, again I feel this sense of a double edge sword and the sense of being trapped in the pressures. On one hand, they wanted to earn the recognition of a scholarship and go to school without financial strains. This process seemed to help to ignite a hope in themselves, to substantiate a sense of confidence in their abilities, and to make other hopes possible. Yet, on the other hand, there appeared to be a significant amount of pressure to satisfy their own expectations, believe they earned it, maintain the high level of performance, and satisfy their parents and institutional demands.

Conclusion: Reflecting Back on Hope

After working at the high school for three years as a teacher and school counsellor, I decided to return to school to complete my Ph.D. in the area of Counselling Psychology at the University of Alberta. I left my position and the school in New Brunswick with many questions concerning my work with gifted students who achieved academically throughout the high school years. The students with whom I worked with during those years of my career are still very close to my heart and inspired in me an enduring professional commitment to education and to students. Having the opportunity to work with six participants throughout this research project and discuss hope in this educational context has helped to clarify a number questions and concerns that will be

presented in the following chapter. This research has been an ongoing dialogue among me and the participants, research texts, and my reflections from the past. It has been both personally rewarding and professionally beneficial for me.

Speaking about hope and high school initially proved to be difficult for the participants, especially initially. It seemed that for many of the participants, it was not difficult to remember high school. Yet, several participants appeared to take time to warm to the conversation because many memories of high school were not happy ones. Indeed, high school seemed to be a time of struggle when hope was often challenging to find. The hope that was available was often confined to sustaining high marks, garnering awards, or satisfying others. Such processes served to threaten a deeper sense of self, a deeper sense of self found in appreciating something much more enduringly hopeful about themselves and their place in the world.

Victoria

> *It was hard to look back, because it is not something I want to look back on. I did great academically, but socially I always felt I didn't fit in and there were people who were just cruel. Although, I think talking about hope has really made me look and see where my hope is now. Yes, I know where it was back then and there is nothing I can do about that now, but where I am getting it from now? I am questioning myself, how do I tap into that, knowing where it came from before, how do I hold onto that and take it with me?*

With passion Victoria further stated,

> *What you are doing has purpose. People like me back then, needed people like you. We did, I will make myself cry, but we really did. When I think back, it would have been great to know that somebody could see us as being different from other people and would have tried to understand what we were going through in high school.*

Jay

> *I hadn't really talked about this before, and it has been so long since I really talked about high school. I guess it was neat going back thinking, 'Oh yeah, I remember this and that, that was a really crappy time.'*

In reflection, Jay further noted,

> *Well, it was my first experience because I have never really talked about my experiences and hope openly to anyone else, so it was interesting. I think it was positive even just to ask questions to someone about how they felt about this certain time and area of life.*

Peter

> *It was fun to talk about hope and to look back. I had never really thought about it as much before from the hope side of it. I had never really stopped to think about hope. Well, you never really have to think about it when you are hopeful. It is only when you are hopeless that you think about what hope is, or why you need it, or what it means, or how to get it? When you have it, it is just an intangible thing that you take for granted that you never really think about. It is interesting to think about how it is that we can give more people hope.*

Peter further articulated that our interviews caused him to have a few good conversations with his friends, which clarified that hope based in supportive relationships helped him imagine and strive for bigger dreams and ultimately, a different future.

> *I started thinking about what I would have done, if I had not been given special treatment in school. Would I have aspired so high, if I had not been pushed or given special events to do? Had I not have been singled out among my peers, what would I have done? Would I have been where I am today? I started thinking about that, and then I thought about kids who were not given the treatment that I was, and if they had, would they be somewhere different too? I had good conversations about that with some friends. We were just talking and wondering if we would we have dreamed as high if we were not, or if someone had of told us we were capable of it, or given us the confidence, or put the trust in us to give us these advantages, and stuff and all this special attention. I concluded that I probably wouldn't have.*
>
> *We talked about not wanting to, like the way public schools are set up seems it is like there is a bell curve with the people who do really well and people who do not so well. There is a whole bunch of people in the middle. Instead of catering to either end, they cater to the average and you sort of truncate that bell curve. Yet, with some of these advanced programs, you get maybe five to ten people on the end and you give them special attention. You*

don't have to take them by the hand or anything, but you do challenge them in some way. And, I was sort of privileged that I was in that group because had I not have been, I just would have been average.

David

David shared his thoughts about the experience and articulated,

I think there was some matter of self-discovery. It is not something I have really thought through before except maybe in anticipation of this. Honestly, at first when I thought about hope in the high school context, I was like "ahhhhh", but it seems like it was kind of there. It is like gravity, one of those things that I have taken for granted, but it has always kind of been there. To talk about hope and to analyze it, and to think through your life is a good thing.

John

John mentioned upon reflecting on his high school experience and his hope.

I guess it has opened up a lot of, I think about these things regularly, so it is kind of fresh on my mind. I like hearing what you have to say, and I have never thought of my own education quite in that way before, it is only looking back that I realized that I really did have a lot of gifts along the way. I feel like I am indebted so much to what I have been given. The only thing I can do is to try to give back to them, to try to make it better in anyway. I feel like if I am going to pursue education and actually end up teaching myself, and that is what I hope to do, that will be my way of giving back. I have been very fortunate in the context of your own research, because I do have hope, and I have had hope.

Chapter Summary

Throughout this chapter, data from my autoethnographic study was presented. My research process was conveyed, the participants were introduced, and the high school context in New Brunswick was discussed in the introductory sections of this chapter. The middle sections of this chapter, explored the data obtained from my past experiences as a school counsellor, the participants, and my experiences as a researcher concerning hope in a variety of high school encounters for gifted academically achieving students. The following themes exploring the

experience of hope for gifted academic achieving students across of variety of contexts are presented (a) creating hope by honouring students' learning, (b) hoping to belong in the high school community, (c) understanding personal hope when competitiveness exists between students, (d) understanding hope within a competitive community, (e) describing hope in the pursuit of scholarly recognition, (f) exploring hope when self is narrowly defined, (g) understanding hope in different academic environments, and (h) understanding hope in high pressured situations. The chapter concludes with information collected from the participants as they reflected on the research process and hope.

DISCUSSION, EXPLICATION, AND IMPLICATIONS

CHAPTER 5

Introduction

Throughout the following chapter, my findings of this study are revisited and explicated considering current literature. Furthermore, implications for teachers, parents, school counsellors, and academically achieving gifted students are discussed. As well, I outline implications for further research in these areas.

Revisiting the Data

From this autoethnographic study, I have encountered many ideas that can add to both hope literature and our understandings of working with academically achieving gifted students. Information concerning the perspectives of gifted academic achievers and gifted programs in New Brunswick has been collected, analyzed, and hopefully, made meaningful in this autoethnography. This present study offered research on hope from the vantage point of former high school students themselves and from my own experiences as a school counsellor working with gifted students who were achieving; studies examining hope in this academic setting are rare (Larsen & Larsen, 2004).

Often no direct links between the hope and gifted literature were apparent; however, relationships between ideas were noted and are addressed in this chapter. The literature will be reviewed in the following section by revisiting the themes presented in chapter four including (a) describing hope in the high school context, (b) understanding hope in the high school environment, (c) hoping to belong in the high school community, (d) understanding personal hope when competitiveness exists between students, (e) understanding hope within a competitive community, (f) describing hope in the pursuit of scholarly recognition, (g) exploring hope when self is narrowly defined, (h)

understanding hope in different academic environments, and (i) understanding hope in high pressured situations.

Descriptions of Hope in the High School Context

The following section outlines the descriptions of hope provided by the six gifted participants, who achieved academically, throughout their high school years and connects these ideas with current scholarship.

Articulating Hopes

Participants were very willing to share their personal experiences in high school. Consistent with the findings of other hope researchers (e.g. Larsen, Edey, and LeMay, 2007), participants sometimes struggled to find specific words to capture a definition of hope. Yet, they were well able to tell stories of hope that detailed how they experienced and sustained hope and how hope was often challenged during high school. Like most other qualitative research studies that explore hope, its meanings are derived inductively from participants' stories (e.g. Turner, 2005). For example, when asked about hope, Peter opted to share a story of how he found hope in his early elementary school years. Furthermore, Jay articulated the difficulty he experienced in defining hope, *"hope is just a kind of that feeling you get when you are in a really tough situation, when you think there is no hope. It is just something that you can't describe, but you know when it is there."*

Definitions of Hope

The participants described hope as a sense of confidence in their own abilities. For example, John defined hope as having *"A sense of confidence in yourself -- believing in yourself. I see in hope a belief in oneself, and a belief in the world."* David also commented that, *"Hope is the confidence that you are going to be able to do what you*

want to do in life." His beliefs were similar to Marie's, who stated that, "*Hope is a lot about confidence."* Their beliefs are similar to Lynch's (1965) and O'Hara's (2000) descriptions that hope allows us to be confident and anticipate a good outcome. Turner (2005) expresses similar findings when she reports that ten Australian youths describe hope, "as a feeling of having a great deal of confidence about [one]self in relation to [ones] life" (p. 510).

The participants' sense of confidence seems not only to be related to confidence in their own abilities, but it also appears to describe a general confidence in the future apart from one's specific abilities. With respect to general confidence, hope serves as a dynamic belief in the future, though specific details of that future may not be known. Their definitions describing hope as a sense of confidence are comparable to a portion of Miller's (2000) definition of hope, "Hope is based upon… a sense of personal competence…" (p. 523-524). Furthermore, these ideas relate to Dufault and Martocchio's concept of generalized hope as a "dynamic life force characterized by a confident yet uncertain expectation of achieving a future good" (p. 380). The participants' hope is not focused on a specific outcome, but rather is an expected good.

Hope also offered a sense of energy and momentum that propelled them onwards towards their goals and through specific high school challenges. Victoria and Jay both reported that they referred to their hope as their drive. Jay shared how, "*For me, it is that energy. Hope and energy go hand in hand."* These conceptions mirror what Turner (2005) states when she determined that hope was a "driving force" (p.511) for youth in her study. Bruininks and Malle (2006) analysis of hope as a folk concept suggests that "hope appears to motivate behaviour by keeping a person engaged with the outcome" (p. 352).

Finally, the participants' descriptions of goals and accomplishing their dreams are similar to Snyder's (1995) definition of hope i.e., "thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation towards and the ways to achieve those goals" (p. 355). This is not surprising, since in many ways high school is set up as an institution and life activity primarily defined as a time to focus on finishing certain goals, while also preparing for other goals in life. Without a doubt, each of the participants had goals they wanted to accomplish and each student had an understanding of what they needed to do in order to accomplish their own specific goals. This was an important aspect of their experiences of hope during high school.

Dimensions of Hope

In reading through their encounters throughout high school and recalling my experiences with academically gifted students, I have realized their understandings of hope are often broader in scope and more multi-dimensional than their specific descriptions sometimes indicate. For instance, their hopes were present when they accomplished their goals, but they were also apparent when they developed relationships and a sense of community. These various aspects of hope mirror the theory of Dufault and Martocchio (1985) as they suggest that hope is, "multi-dimensional" (p. 380) in nature. Because Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) theory formed a foundational definition for hope at the outset of this study, the following discussion examines relationships between their hope theory and findings of this study.

Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) conceptualization of hope is comprised of "two spheres having six common dimensions" (P. 380). The two spheres relate to one another, but do differ. One sphere "generalized hope," gives a person a protective positive spirit towards life. While the second sphere is called "particularized hope," and represents

hopes that are focused on particular "valued outcomes" (p. 380). While the participants described their hopes in generalized ways, as a state of being able to feel hopeful about themselves and their futures, they frequently described their hopes in high school as being particularized. In this sense, many of the participants hoped for high marks and scholarships and to be recognized for their accomplishments.

Dufault and Martocchio's (1985) two spheres (generalized hope and particularized hope) are comprised of six dimensions including the: "affective, cognitive, behavioural, affiliative, temporal, and contextual" (p. 381). In reviewing the discussions around hope from the participants, each of these dimensions was perceptible. For instance, they described hope as a feeling of "confidence" and "energy". These emotions represent the "affective dimension" of the hoping process. The participants suggested a "cognitive dimension" of hope, which permitted them to "believe they could do things, they wanted to do". Further, the cognitive dimension is the element which focuses on goal-setting. The "behavioural dimension" was represented in their comments about hope being their "drive" to keep going no matter the circumstances. The "affiliative dimension" was reflected in the fact that many of these students, in one way or another, wanted "to accomplish something" in the world and feel connected with others and to things beyond themselves. The "temporal dimension" was noticed throughout the participants' descriptions of moments from the past that represented hope and their desires for in the future. Lastly, this study explored the "contextual dimension" of hope as participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of hope and how it varied in different ways throughout high school.

Sources of Hope

Participants in this study described their sources of hope throughout high school. They shared how the nature of the support they received from parents, teachers, and friends impacted their hope. For instance, when students understood that teachers and parents believed in them, no matter what the outcome, participants often found this support hopeful. Farren, Herth, and Popvitch (1995) suggest that hope is formed in relationships and that hope is something that "occurs between persons" (p. 10). Whether the individuals in their lives were providing them nurturing support or giving them attention and recognition for their accomplishments, it was the relationship that was the conduit of the hope offering. Miller (2000) states that, "hope… is based upon mutuality (relationships with others)" (p. 523-524) and the participants in this research appeared to confirm this idea.

In addition to the support they received throughout high school, hope stories of being able to work things out in their past or succeeding before at little things seemed to feed a sense of hope for the future for academically gifted students in my study. These ideas relate to Snyder's (1995) methods for increasing hope in individuals. He suggests that "recalling past successes and cultivating friends with whom you can talk about life goals" (p. 358) helps to increase hope.

Furthermore, the hopes of the participants appeared to be connected to deeply held desires to be something and to accomplish something in the world. A few of the participants discussed how little points of encouragement from the past, developed their hope in the present and hope for their deeply seated dreams. In this matter, participants were in many ways developing a sense of confidence in themselves and their abilities. This sense of competence and sense of confidence in themselves fueled their own hope.

These notions are similar to Miller's (1989) ideas for inspiring hope in critically ill adult patients. She suggested that creating a sense of determinism helps to stimulate hope in individuals.

The participants also shared that hope and meaning were found when they were able to explore their interests, engage their imagination fully, indulge in their passions, and move towards what they really loved with little concern about performance. Independent studies served as an oasis from the everyday routine of the curriculum. Further, when the participants attended Shad Valley, the national program for gifted students, the same love of learning was sparked when the students were not focused on marks. That independent experience fostered a sense of hope in that very process. This passion for being involved in the learning process created a sense of energy and forged a connection between engaging in learning and inspiring hope in life. Such concepts, although not specifically written about in the literature, tend to speak about creating meaningful experiences in their educational experience and parallel Frankl's (1962) belief that meaning is a fundamental component of the human experience. This very process helps to maintain a sense of well-being and connectedness with something greater than oneself (Frankl, 1962).

Hope in the High School Environment

After revisiting the descriptions from the participants of the grade ten and the level one classrooms in schools in New Brunswick, it is clear to me that there were three primary areas which related to both fostering hope and challenging hope: (a) when learning was taken seriously, hope was inspired; (b) when students were not engaged, hope was challenged; (c) and when students were encouraged to work independently, hope was created.

First, when students believed that their learning and their abilities were taken seriously, both in the classroom and in discussions with others about their learning and active engagement, they appeared to experience hope. For instance, when a students' classroom environment promoted learning, students experienced hope.

Fluckinger (2004), in the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska, writes that teaching styles that parallel the participants' desires to be active contributors in their learning process and to be faced with challenging opportunities foster hope. Fluckinger indicates that students who are "partners in their own education will achieve more," (p. 43) and when students are simply coached on how to get high grades they will not genuinely understand the concepts and "authentic learning is devalued" (p. 42). Further, Fluckinger states that teachers must be careful that education doesn't become "test score-centered" (p. 43) and lose the necessary "student-centered" perspective. She argues that,

> teaching for learning empowers students with confident self-efficacy to believe they can make a difference, to take initiative, to delay gratification, to persist in the face of adversity, to empathize, and to hope (p. 43).

Second, in contrast to the classroom being a source of hope, it can also threaten engagement and hope. As Farren, Herth, and Popovitch (1995) remind us, "hopelessness may serve as a feeling or despair and discouragement" (p.25) or as Korner (1970) maintains a "deenergizing force." I witnessed such occurrences many times as a high school counsellor, and the participants spoke of such feelings during their high school years. When academically achieving gifted students felt under-challenged in their studies, they often became frustrated and discouraged within the educational system.

These experiences were mainly described by the participants when they discussed their first two years in high school (grades 9 & 10).

Third, these academically achieving students demonstrated other ways that enhanced their hope within the school system. For instance, independent studies and projects designed around individual students' interests and passions appeared to be very meaningful ways to foster hope. As a school counsellor, I observed that when students were given the opportunity to learn new things independently, they found hope in the process. When they were permitted to go beyond the standardized curriculum outlined by the province, complete independent studies, experience personal investment, and be an engaged active part of their educational process, they discovered hope. The participants' hopes increased when individuals in their lives took them seriously and helped to create direction in their educational careers. These sources of hope mirror Turner's (2005) findings with youth suggesting hope is about "having choices" (p. 511) and about having choices that could "ultimately lead to the fulfillment of desires and hopes" (p.511). The experiences described throughout this study, by one of the participants, remind me of Hafen, et al's (1996) assertion that hope is about possibility. Hope helps to reminds us, that more may be possible than originally imagined.

Hopes to Belong and to be Connected Throughout High School

Five of the six participants felt as though they didn't "fit into the system" or belong anywhere in high school. Research repeatedly reveals that hope flourishes in relationships with others (Farren, Herth, & Popovitch, 1995) and has an affiliative dimension (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985). Larsen and Larsen (2004) found relationships to be a key aspect of high school students' self-metaphors, a strong parallel to their hope research. Consequently, when participants in this study experienced isolation from their

peers, their hope was challenged. They wanted to be themselves and remain in accepting relationships with other students.

Understanding Hope for the Individual amidst the Competitiveness

There appeared to be a variety of situations that helped to describe how hope was experienced by the individual participants throughout high school. Three scenarios seem particularly poignant: (a) earning low marks on tests, (b) threats to relationships because of the competition, and (c) double-bind situations.

Participants in this study often described how earning low marks on tests would often cause hopeless feelings. These feelings remained with the students for a long period of time. The low marks seemed to challenge their sense of self-efficacy, which refers to individuals' judgments about their abilities to complete a specific task (Bandura, 1997). Furthermore, marks appeared to define much of who they were as individuals and determined who they understood themselves to be throughout school. Framing one's identity strongly around marks can create a very narrow definition of self. This narrow definition of self may mean that identity seems to "bounce" with every up and down of grades. This "bouncing" may result in a sense of being ungrounded and may present a serious challenge to the hope students held in themselves.

Furthermore, personal resolve was often dominated by stress and pressures to be competitive and recognized. According to the participants in this study, relationships between classmates, which could serve to enhance hope (Yarscheski, Scoloveno, & Mahon, 1994), were often threatened, shallowed, and challenged in the face of competition for marks.

As a result of the competitive mentality, gifted academic achievers, described in my study, were often in positions that created "double binds" or "lose, lose situations".

They sought a hope created from the public recognition of doing well, but were caught because they didn't want to appear as though they were the "smart kid" and risk receiving the social ridicule associated with doing well. Competition often threatened friendships. Jevne (1991) indicated that "hope is commonly found in a life situation that has an element of captivity" (p. 149). The participants in this study often described feelings as either captive to their academic aspirations or their social relationships with little or no way of reconciling the two. These predicaments also can be understood in the context of being stuck in a double-bind situation without a way to emerge feeling adequate or satisfied with one's self. Such situations challenged hope, rather than inspired it.

Hope in a Competitive Community

The competitive high school environment appeared to routinely diminish hope, challenge the possibility for close relationships between students, and threaten the creation of community. Turner (2005) found that participants in her study believed that "it is important to develop closeness with others and to share their humanity in some way" (p. 512). The competitive environments in high schools appeared not to foster or nourish respectful human connections, and consequently, such environments cultivated more destructive traits. The competitive mentality, that existed throughout the level one classrooms of participants in this study, appeared to strongly stifle the hope of the students. It tended to remove the "humanity" from the classrooms and served to be contrary to Noddings' (1996) beliefs, which urge teachers to return the "humanity" to the classrooms.

A sense of relationship and compassion appears to be essential to fostering hope within gifted education. Situations where students compete with each other threatened the sense of relationship, community, and camaraderie between students. These very

experiences of relationship, community, and camaraderie help to create hope (Farren, Herth, & Popovitch, 1995), and, consequently, hope was often challenged in more competitive environments.

Hope in the Pursuit of Scholarly Recognition: A Double Edge Sword

These academically achieving gifted students, attempted to seek very external ways to enhance their hope. Often times the recognition from others brought attention, which they didn't want to receive, to the gifted academically achieving students. Victoria was often called the "smart kid" even when she was playing soccer for her high school team, while John felt he was asked to complete more work and was graded on a different scale. The external recognition earned from doing well in school often caused hardships in other areas of their lives. In these situations, perhaps these academic achievers were attempting to use a particularized hope (i.e. external accolades) to fuel their generalized hope (i.e. sense that protects individuals) (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985), and consequently, were not successful at feeling comfortable with being true to themselves, despite the comments and differential treatment from others.

Understanding Hope when Self is Narrowly Defined

In a study of matriculation level tenth grade English students, Larsen and Larsen (2004) stated that hope is "an important and, seemingly, pervasive aspect of self during adolescence development" (p. 255). Yet, during this stage of development when adolescents are actively reflecting upon and creating self-identity, it is worrisome to consider how the desire for academic perfection, experienced by many gifted students (Kerr, 1991), may lead to narrow definitions of self and, ultimately, an insecure groundwork from which to build a sense of individuality and security in the future.

Lynch (1965), an eminent early hope scholar, indicated there are five noteworthy areas of hopelessness: "death, personal imperfections, imperfect emotional control, inability to trust people, and personal areas of incompetence" (p. 25). Given that these academically gifted achievers shared they "had seeds of perfectionism" and questioned their personal imperfections, this statement is quite concerning and suggests a connection between imperfection and challenges to hope. According to participants in this study, perfectionistic tendencies often led to a very single-minded view of the way things in life should be.

These perfectionistic tendencies provide inflexible frameworks from which to understand the world. They close the door on possibilities and may lead one to attempt to control all uncertainty. Perfectionism is a belief that stipulates there is only one outcome under which the self will be okay, under which the self can conceive of a future in which the self wishes to participate, under which the self is acceptable, or under which the self is worthy (Kerr, 1991). These facts ultimately lead to inevitable clashes with hope. Farsen, Herth, and Popovitch (1995) remind us that hope enables the "creative and imaginative process to occur" and helps to make restrictions in life more flexible.

Being in Different Environments and Finding Hope in Belonging

When the six students had the opportunity to develop relationships, to form connections, to learn for the love of learning, to realize more was possible, and to feel like they belonged to a group, without having to compete with each other or compare specific high school marks, hope was enhanced. What became apparent to me throughout this study was that the sense of hope created in these experiences was deeper in nature, more meaningful, and apparently more easily sustained than those hopes simply aimed at receiving a high mark on a test. Vaclav Havel (1990) shares a similar

observation when he states in his poem, "Hope is a dimension of the spirit. It is not outside us but within us. When you lose it you must seek it again within yourself and with people around you, not in objects or even in events."

Understanding Hope while Experiencing Pressures

As a school counsellor, I often observed that academically achieving gifted students felt a significant amount of pressure from scholarship committees, parents, teachers, school administrators, and themselves. The pressures to perform appeared to impact negatively the hope of the gifted academically achieving gifted students. Supon (2004) shares these thoughts and suggests that "abundant pressures can negatively impact their [students'] performance" throughout school.

Implications

Implications for Schools and Teachers

Teachers play a crucial role in the lives of their students. Throughout my study it has become evident that teachers and the school environment can serve to create, develop, and maintain hope with their academically achieving gifted students. As such, there are many implications that teachers and school systems may consider in order to positively impact the hope of gifted students with whom they work.

Research in this study highlights how teachers can create hope by offering recognition for success and accomplishments. Yet, the study also demonstrates how teacher recognition can also serve as a "double-edge sword," by perhaps creating expectations and causing students to get noticed in negative ways by other peers. Recognition might unwittingly place academically gifted students in awkward social/peer situations. Students, with whom I have worked in the past, tended to appreciate it when teachers rewarded them for the process of learning, rather than for the high marks

obtained on tests and assignments. Fluckinger (2004) states that acknowledging learning helps students to realize that each person has value, rather than believing that "only those with high test scores have value" (p. 43).

Furthermore, it is important to consider the role that recognition is playing in the lives of academically achieving gifted students and the emphasis that students are placing on the acknowledgement. Students from this study often appeared to place great emphasis on their grades, at the expense of engaging fully in their learning. Yet, these students may not want personal information about marks and scholarships shared with others. In addition, these students appreciated it when teachers and others looked beyond strictly external rewards and ensured that a deeper meaning and a deeper hope was discovered as a resource within each student. This process according to Fluckinger (2004) will help students from learning "to value extrinsic rewards over intrinsic satisfactions of lasting value" (p. 42).

Relational aspects of hope are very significant to these students. It may be wise for teachers and school officials to revisit how a competitive atmosphere might negatively affect the sense of community and the psychological health of individuals within their classrooms. Hope may be nourished when the students are encouraged to work together on projects or assignments that celebrate partnerships and team efforts, rather than only honouring high marks and individual accomplishments. Furthermore, students may benefit from having certain assignments that are not graded but are used as learning tools, not evaluation tools. Supon (2004) refers to such assignments and tests as "low-stakes assignments" (p. 292).

The use of language in the classroom also had an impact on these students. Academic achievers in this study described feeling very uncomfortable discussing their

specific grades. It may be helpful if students were encouraged to refrain from openly discussing their specific marks and encouraged to use general statements about their performance. Changing the emphasis from the mark to a statement about the overall performance may help to shift the hope from a narrow definition to a broader understanding of hope that can be more easily maintained.

Hope appeared to be cultivated in situations where students were given an opportunity for independence and were supported throughout the process. Independent studies and enrichment projects were very much appreciated, as they helped to create independent thinkers and confident students with hopeful spirits.

Openly discussing hope, individual hopes for the future, and even threats to hope may also help to create a more personally meaningful learning environment. According to Lenora LeMay, Director of Education at the Hope Foundation of Alberta, recent innovations, employing hope-focused curriculum within classrooms, indicate that hope discussions and class work offer a humanizing or positive affective impact on the classroom community (Personal communication, LeMay, 2007).

Implications for Parents

Throughout my study, it was apparent that participants felt most hopeful when they received unconditional support throughout the learning process, when parents were mindful of the impact of the competitive environment within the schools, when they understood the pressures associated with scholarships, and when they were able to foster the natural curiosities of their children.

According to participants in this study, unconditional support from parents helped to foster and nourish the hope of their children. When parents focused on supporting the learning process and celebrated the gifts of their children regardless of the marks, they

helped their children to sustain hope. Students felt most hope when parents were careful of how they recognized and rewarded their academically achieving gifted students. When parents place an emphasis on providing a balanced approach that acknowledges success and rewards dedication and hard work, students are able to feel support. Parents may want to consider not only giving rewards based on high marks, but they may wish to reinforce the actions and the love of learning that produced the high grade. Such a framework is likely to help create hope in academically achieving gifted students.

In this research, I encountered stories detailing the pressures that academically achieving gifted students face daily in the school systems. Parents are invited to be mindful of the environment their children may be encountering and the affects it may be having on the hope of their children. Students from this study tended to feel most hopeful in unconditional environments where they could voice their concerns, disappointments, and joys. When supportive surroundings are created at home, a fuller sense of self may be recognized and valued by the students themselves. Parents who recognize their child as a "whole person" may provide the child with a solid belief that they are more than their marks.

Undoubtedly, scholarships are advantageous when contemplating post-secondary studies. Yet, participants in this research and students from my own experiences as a high school counsellor suggest that scholarship competitions place students in high pressure situations. When family financial support for post-secondary education is not possible, this fact is especially true and presents a challenging situation. Nevertheless, parents are encouraged to be aware of scholarship pressures and act in ways to support the efforts without adding to the demands already on the shoulders of academically achieving gifted students.

Academically gifted students from this study seemed to appreciate and thrive when their naturally curiosities were stimulated and when a love of learning was modeled. Parents may not recognize the added importance of these facts when their child is academically gifted, and as such, parents are encouraged to celebrate learning within the home.

Implications for School Counsellors

High school counsellors are usually involved in many diverse activities throughout the day. They are responsible for the comprehensive guidance curriculum, students' individual programs of study, career counselling, group counselling, and personal counselling. In each of these domains, school counsellors can help to foster hope in academically achieving gifted students and to make hope a more tangible and accessible for the entire school.

Concerning the comprehensive guidance curriculum and making hope more visible, school counsellors can promote hope on a school wide basis. Students might benefit from being guided through various programs that help them understand their own personal hopes. Counsellors might want to encourage teachers to teach a thematic unit on hope. For instance, an English teacher may examine modern literature that discusses the notions of hope or a social studies teacher may examine how individuals in various adverse conditions maintained their hope. These thematic units would help to make hope more tangible and could be a part of the comprehensive guidance curriculum. Snyder, et al. (2003) stated that improving hope in students should be a priority for teachers and school psychologists. Further, Snyder, et al. (2003) suggested that universal and specific "hope raising techniques" be utilized in the school systems with individual students and

with students working in a group setting. At the Hope Foundation of Alberta, specific short programming, in the form of units, has been developed for just this purpose.

As noted throughout my study, hope was fostered in academically achieving gifted students when their educational careers were taken seriously and when they played an active role in the educational process. High school counsellors responsible for students' individual programs of study need to be mindful of this understanding and are encouraged to work with the student to ensure that their concerns are addressed. Furthermore, school counsellors might try to find ways to create individually driven programs within the standardized program of study. For instance, designing independent studies for academically achieving gifted students could become a serious option throughout high school. By having such opportunities, academically achieving gifted students will be encouraged to love learning for the sake of learning, develop a sense of confidence in themselves, create a sense of energy and initiative, discover that more is possible beyond set curricula, explore some of their "big dreams" with respect to what they eventually hope to become in life, and foster hope.

A form of group counselling could be very valuable to academically achieving gifted students. Group counselling sessions could promote conversation about the competitive mentality, perfectionism, stress management, managing pressures, hope building resources, focusing explicitly on building a hopeful community, as well as their hopes for the future and themselves.

School counsellors working with academically achieving gifted students need to pay special attention to such students. Personal counselling programs should be tailored to the gifted individual student's needs. Similar to the work that may be completed in group counselling sessions, individual counselling may help challenge ideas of

perfectionism and the competitive mentality, offer stress management programs, help students to understand their personal sources of hope, and help students connect to multiple hopes about what they hope for themselves in the future and in the moment. Snyder, et al. (2003) suggest that by identifying multiple hopes, students lessen the blow when any specific single hope is not realized. Furthermore, school counsellors working with academically achieving gifted students might be mindful of how students define themselves. If they view themselves solely through their marks, then broader self-definitions that offer a more firm foundation for seeing hope in themselves and their future should be explored.

Implications for Academically Achieving Gifted Students

Academically achieving students play a vital role in enhancing their own hopes. As such, it was noted throughout this study that a variety of strategies exist for enhancing their own hopes.

Academically achieving gifted students need to be supported in their knowledge that there are matters that can be more meaningful in the world than marks and high grades. Undoubtedly, marks will play a significant role throughout their academic years, but students need to consider that marks alone do not and will not define who they are as individuals. When students have a constricted view of what matters, they ultimately have a narrow perspective of themselves. Such narrow personal perspectives make it difficult to have a hopeful spirit and unnecessarily threaten a sense of self when high grades are not achieved.

Hope flourishes within a community setting. Academically achieving gifted students need to understand and have the opportunity to experience what this hope means. They need to learn to work with each other and be a part of a community.

Academically achieving gifted students need to be aware that their educational careers are journeys with highlights and lowlights. These journeys need to be honoured and respected without comparison. Comparisons may devalue the personal journey, alter the focus, and defy hope.

Students throughout this study mentioned that hope flourished when they were able to be active participants in their educational careers. As such, academically achieving gifted students may wish to pursue independent projects and opportunities to be active participants in their learning. They may work to discover and participate in activities that they truly love in the world and seek a life that is full of engaged learning.

Implications for Further Research

Implications for Further Research on Similar Topics

This autoethnography explored both my understandings and those of the participants. I explored notions of hope in educational settings by examining the stories and experiences of the participants and my own. These stories were interpreted throughout this study. Implications for teachers, counsellors, academically achieving gifted students, and parents were presented. I believe that further research is needed to understand hope for students throughout the high school experience. Research exploring how hope is experienced by other student cohorts is needed (i.e. students with learning disabilities). Such research would provide teachers, parents, and school officials with a deeper understanding of how these students experience hope and how hope is woven through the overall educational experience.

I also wonder if gifted academically achieving students from other parts of the county experience hope differently. With the provincial and local differences in

educational settings, what might be the experience of hope for gifted academically achieving students in locales and educational programs beyond New Brunswick?

In a similar vein, we might look at how male gifted academically achieving students experience hope compared to how female gifted academic achievers experience hope. Larsen and Larsen's (2004) research hints that there may be some differences concerning the experience of hope based on gender.

In this research, academically achieving gifted students tend to describe their hope as being about the "future" and it was often described as being "action-oriented." Clearly more research on developmental aspects of hope is warranted. Little research has attended to how hope is developed and experienced by children and youth. Adolescents are in a mode of preparing for life in many ways. Does this situation have impact on their experience of hope as a goal directed activity?

Similar to the rest of Canada, the province of New Brunswick is becoming increasingly culturally diverse. Although my students were all from similar ethnic backgrounds, I wonder how the experiences of hope for gifted academically achieving students from different ethnic backgrounds may differ. Would ethnically diverse students experience hope in a similar way? Would the pressures and support from the home environments be experienced in the same manner? Would school contexts be experienced similarly or differently as well?

Finally, it is also important to understand what happens to the hope of gifted students who were not high achievers in school: How is hope experienced throughout their high school years? Might the nature of their experiences of hope impact their decisions not to achieve academically? A better understanding of hope under these circumstances is needed.

Implications for Further Autoethnographic Research

In addition to further research in the area of hope and academically achieving gifted students, I contend that more autoethnographic studies are needed in the academic and research literature by educational and psychological professionals. In my opinion, autoethnographic research concerning the hope of students with learning disabilities and attention concerns, completed by teachers and former students, would be of benefit to the larger educational community. Also, with the increasing culturally diverse population in Canada, autoethnographic research exploring hope and the educational experiences of exchange, international, and immigrant students would be helpful. Revisiting past professional experiences, I believe, helps us to understand our current professional philosophies, strengthen our professional commitments, develop our own sense of self, and bring hope into our lives.

In particular, I encourage educational professionals to explore experiences with students that they have never understood. This research helped me to understand an area of my work life that kept me up at night many times, and it has dramatically changed the way I work with gifted academically achieving students. For example, after this research project, when I individually counselled students who were gifted academic achieving students, I seldom asked them about their marks and encouraged them to use broad descriptors to describe their progress. I openly discussed their narrow definitions of their perfect selves and encouraged them to frame their self understandings in ways that were more meaningful to them. While working with students who achieved academically, I encouraged them to share their hopes. I invited students to find multiple hopes for the future, rather than just a singular hope that resides within grades. Furthermore, I implemented a mentorship program where students, who were gifted academic achieving

students in high school, were paired with former students, who were also gifted academically achieving students throughout high school. In this way, I attempted to support both the hopes for academic success and for relationships.

While teaching in a classroom, learning was celebrated. Hope and dreams were constantly being discussed. Students in my class were encouraged to take risks with their learning, instead of worrying about their marks. In fact, students were not permitted to discuss their grades openly; rather, they were encouraged to only discuss their overall performance with each other. Frequently throughout the term, students were given the option to complete additional assignments to simply better their skills, instead of being graded. Throughout each unit of study, students were given options for independent studies, so that they could realize genuine interest in a particular area. Additionally, I shared my own hopes as a learner with my students, and they were given the opportunity to know that I was also a student.

Summary

As I near the end of my doctoratal degree in Counselling Psychology, I feel I have had an opportunity to explore the areas that encouraged me to return to graduate studies in the first place. I left my high school counselling position at the large urban high school with a number of questions about my students, our experiences, and myself. I believe that throughout this research experience, which explored understandings about how academic achievers experienced hope and how hope affected their educational encounters, many of my own questions in the area of hope and gifted academic achieving students have been addressed. As I come to the completion of this study, I find it both satisfying and ironic that I have returned to the teaching profession at a very competitive private school in Alberta.

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One evening recently, my home telephone rang.

"Ms. Thompson," the voice inquired.

"Yes."

"This is Miles Lawson, otherwise known as "Duck Lawson". I am now living in Calgary working for the summer at an oil and gas company. I will graduate next year from university, and I took a co-op opportunity out west to improve my chances of gaining employment when I am finished," Miles humbly shared his news.

"That is fantastic! Let's get together for a coffee sometime, as I would love to hear what is happening in your life."

I met my former student, who was an academically achieving gifted student in high school, one evening for a coffee. We laughed about our times together at the large urban high school and collectively reflected on our experiences. I mentioned that I had been offered a counselling position at a private high school in Calgary, but that I was not certain it was the correct move for me professionally. Miles told me of the impact that I had on his life, and how I, as a school counsellor, encouraged him to see his own gifted potential. He shared that I would 'do more good' at the high school than anywhere else. With his comments and a few other emails from former students, I accepted the school counselling position at the private school.

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Looking back on first sections of this document, I understand much more of my own journey through school as a high school student and have further developed my perspectives on the journeys of my students. Upon reflection, people encouraged me to do well, rather than to find hope in the love of learning. Interestingly as a school

counsellor, I know I focused a lot of energy on competition and success. Yet, I now realize there are matters that are more meaningful, such as a more balanced, fulsome, or multidimensional perspective on hope at school. I now work with my students from this new perspective.

As I reflect upon the research focus for this study, I feel that I have accomplished my original intentions of acknowledging my personal and professional experiences in my research project and sharing stories of hope and the high school experience of six academically achieving gifted New Brunswick high school students. Throughout the research process, I personally reflected on my past experiences working with academically achieving gifted students and included detailed accounts of how the participants experienced hope and how these experiences influenced their educational encounters.

Several key themes emerged throughout the research process. First, hope for gifted academically achieving students was described as a dynamic and energetic sense of confidence about their own futures. Sources of hope for such students involved supportive parents, friends, and teachers, but also entailed earning recognition, accolades, and encouragement from meaningful individuals within their lives.

Secondly, much was learned about hope in the context of the high school systems for these participants. The early high school years (grades nine and ten) for the participants most often appeared to serve as a meaningless period in their educational careers that stifled their hopes. Enriched classes and independent studies offered in later years (grades eleven and twelve) offered students hope in their learning, as an independent learning style, focused on application and exploration of knowledge, made the overall process more meaningful. Within such environments students were

encouraged to take risks with their learning and to recognize that knowledge, as one participant shared, "was sacred". These academically achieving students often felt as though their hope was challenged as they struggled to "fit in" with their peers, felt intense pressures to succeed, and critically evaluated their performance on a regular basis. These struggles often led students to believe that their marks defined them and were central to their existence. Such narrow definitions of self encouraged these academically achieving gifted students to develop a one-dimensional perspective of themselves that challenged a deeper sense of hope and restricted what was possible. Further, a seemingly sole focus on grades had the power to dissociate some students from the learning process. A sense of meaning and hope were often overshadowed by the competition between students. Recognition, in many different forms, was sought after and served as the currency in most classrooms. Yet, for these academically achieving gifted students, it also served as a double-edge sword that slashed their sense of hope, because it often accompanied great expectations and negative ramifications from peers. Finally, when these academically achieving gifted students were in learning environments that celebrated knowledge exploration, non-competitiveness, and each other their hopes flourished, strengthened, and became more meaningful.

On a personal note as I close this research, I feel that I have accomplished my meaningful intentions. I have learned about myself as a professional school counsellor/psychologist, teacher, and gifted individual, and I ultimately feel more confident working with academically achieving gifted students in the school systems.

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Recently at a private school in Calgary, Alberta, Jessica, a gifted achiever, walked into my office, sat down, and started to cry. "I just got a horrible mark on my Math 30

test, and I can't handle the pressures to do well anymore," she moaned and awaited my reply.

"You are more than your marks, and there are more meaningful matters in life," I said with professional confidence. I knew just where we might head next in the therapeutic conversation.

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Appendix 1

INFORMATION LETTER AND INFORMED CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
Faculty of Graduate Studies
Department of Educational Psychology

Project Title: Meaningful Matters: An Autoethnography of Hope for Academically Gifted High School Achievers

Investigator: Kathryn E. Holleran
403-243-4148 or 403-998-0958
ket@ualberta.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Denise Larsen
780-492-5897 or 780-492-1222 (Hope Foundation of Alberta)
djlarsen@ualberta.ca

Dear Participants:

I would like to invite you to participate in this research study concerning hope and gifted adolescents. The purpose of this qualitative study is to gain an enhanced understanding of the experience of hope throughout high school from the perspectives of gifted individuals. This study will serve as a component of my Doctor of Philosophy degree in Counselling Psychology from the University of Alberta.

Your participation would consist of a series of taped interviews (probably 2 or 3) and may involve taped telephone interviews (probably 1-2). All recorded conversations pertaining to your experience during high school will be transcribed. The data collected from the series of interviews will be kept confidential so that your name will be known only to me the investigator and my supervisor. You will be asked to review the transcriptions of our conversations to discuss the information recorded. In my dissertation and any written documentation regarding this project and the names of all participants and the names of the high schools will be changed. Furthermore, any such distinguishing or identifying features will be omitted from all publicly shared aspects of this research.

Throughout this research process, you, as a participant, have specific rights. They include:

1.) To not participate.
2.) To withdraw at any time without prejudice to pre-existing entitlements, and to continuing and meaningful opportunities for deciding whether or not to continue to participate.
3.) To opt out without penalty and any collected data withdrawn from the data base and not included in the study.
4.) To privacy, anonymity and confidentiality.
5.) To safeguards for security of data (data are to be kept for a minimum of 5 years following completion of research).
6.) To disclosure of the presence of any apparent or actual conflict of interest on the part of the researcher(s).
7.) To counselling should the need be as a result of participation.

I appreciate your contributions to this study and thank you for volunteering your time. If you have any questions or concerns please contact me or my advisor, Dr. Denise Larsen, at the previously mentioned numbers. Furthermore, this study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EE REB at (780) 492-3751.

Sincerely, Kathryn E. Holleran, M. Ed.

I, _____ agree to voluntarily participate in this research project and have completely read my rights as a participant.

_____ _____
(Participant's Signature) (Date)

Appendix 2

GUIDING CONVERSATION QUESTIONS
UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
Faculty of Graduate Studies
Department of Educational Psychology

It is my intention to conduct the interactive interviews in a conversational manner that naturally follows the lead of the participants. As such, the following conversation questions will serve as guiding questions to prompt discussion and will only be asked when deemed appropriate.

Retrospective: Hope and the High School Experience

1. Tell me about your early high school years?
2. Would you tell me a story that helps me to understand your experience of preparing to leave high school?
3. What thoughts/ feelings/emotions do you associate with your high school experience?
4. What stories would you tell about your high school experience as a gifted student that would help someone understand your experience of hope in your high school years?
5. What did you hope high school would be like, what did you hope high school would have to offer?
6. Was there a time(s) when you needed hope in high school, how did you know? Did you find hope? How did find hope?
7. Tell me about where your hope came from in high school? How important was it to have hope at that time in your life?
8. Were there circumstances where you felt that your hopes were diminished, threatened, or challenged? Tell me about those experiences.
9. Were there circumstances when you felt a great deal of hope in your high school years? Tell me about those experiences.
10. What was hope for you throughout you high school experience as a gifted student?

Hope in the Present

11. What do I have to know about you to understand your hope? What is hope for you?
12. What does hope mean to you now?
13. In what ways do you think/sense hope is important in life?
14. If hope were a symbol, a picture, a song from your high school days, what would it be?

Closing the Interview

15. What is it like to talk about hope in this way?
16. Does anything stand out for you as we close this interview?
17. Anything else you would like me to know about?
18. Closing.